

## A Study in Attraction by Madame\_Ashley

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**Summary:**

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"Study," Steve said, dropping his voice to a whisper, "and admire each other." Jonathan's mouth went dry. Harrington was thoroughly enjoying himself. "You do admire me, don't you, Jonathan?"

# 1. Chapter 1

“Why don’t you study with Jonathan? He knows this stuff even better than I do.” Nancy made the remark casually, as if the idea of her boyfriend and Byers hanging out together was the most natural thing in the world. With a history test coming up in less than a week, Steve just assumed that Nancy would insist on spending Saturday night preparing, so he was surprised when she announced plans to head out of town for a campus tour.

“Studying” had begun as a euphemism for getting into Nancy’s pants, but in time their evening prep sessions were actually improving Steve’s grades. As anxious as the thought of being alone with Byers made him, Steve was at a loss to think of a better substitute study partner. His other friends weren’t a particularly scholastic bunch, and Jonathan was a dedicated student; he even had his college applications in ahead of the deadline.

After joining forces against the Demogorgon, Steve began to spend time socially with Jonathan, but Nancy was always with them, keeping any residual awkwardness between the two boys at bay. The trajectory of Steve’s relationship with Jonathan was so bizarre that it was challenging to classify as a friendship, but also impossible to define as anything else. Where do you really stand with someone who takes creepy pictures of your girlfriend then saves you from being murdered by an inter-dimensional monster?

Steve was meditating on these thoughts when Nancy strolled up to his locker later in the day and informed him that Jonathan would be happy to help him prepare for the test. “Did he say those exact words?” Steve chuckled. “It’s kind of hard to picture Byers saying he’d “be happy” about anything.” He hoped his sarcastic tone disguised the strange pleasure he took in Nancy’s news.

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Steve felt dazed as he sat on the bed poring over his American history notes. Jonathan’s room was tidy: bed made, no dirty laundry on the floor, no dishes littering the nightstand. Posters papered the walls - Joan Jett & the Blackhearts, Bronski Beat, some gory-looking horror

movies. The stereo – immaculately maintained – played Talking Heads at a respectable volume, David Byrne’s meandering lyrics speaking directly to Steve’s state of mind: And you may ask yourself / “Well, how did I get here?”

Jonathan was sitting in the desk chair, his feet propped up on the bed, an open textbook in his lap. He’d hardly uttered ten words since Steve arrived, the mumbled offer of a Pepsi his only gesture of hospitality. Steve had been sipping soda and stifling yawns for nearly half an hour when he cleared his throat to get Jonathan’s attention. “So, Byers, do you have any notecards with sample questions on them or anything?”

The quiet boy looked up, tucking a strand of hair self-consciously behind his ear. “I usually just read a few passages and make some notes. Or I read over my old notes,” he muttered, almost under his breath. “Isn’t that what you do?”

“Byers, for a creative type, you show a stunning lack of imagination,” Steve groaned with a pronounced eye roll, snatching the textbook from Jonathan’s lap and tossing it across the room. He perched on the edge of the bed, giving his host an expectant look. “Quiz me. I know all the presidents...”

Flustered, Jonathan jumped up from his chair and moved to retrieve the textbook, knocking the Pepsi from Steve’s hand in the process. Soda saturated the front of Steve’s pastel polo. “Shit, Byers! Chill out, will you?”

“I’m used to studying alone,” Jonathan shrugged, by way of explanation. An apology wasn’t forthcoming.

Steve undid the two buttons at his collar and tugged the wet shirt over his head. Jonathan’s sullen expression changed in an instant; he was now openly staring at Steve’s bare chest.

“See anything you like, Byers?” Steve quipped, aware that he might be taking things too far but seized by a recklessness that he couldn’t explain. He enjoyed the way Jonathan was looking at him, felt excited by the appraisal of those guarded brown eyes.

Jonathan became conscious of his brazen ogling, and glancing away, murmured, "I could lend you another shirt, if you want."

"Sure. How about the one you're wearing?"

"What?" Jonathan was blushing when he finally made eye contact, a smirk teasing the corner of his mouth as he struggled to figure out whether Steve was serious.

"Well, are you going to hand it over or what? I'm getting chilly over here." Steve lay back on the bed, propping himself up on his elbows.

The colour spreading across Jonathan's pronounced cheekbones was sexy as hell, his face breaking into an unexpected grin. "Why are you fucking with me?"

At first Steve was too startled by Byers' choice of language to respond. He was about to make some dismissive remark when Jonathan – holding Steve's gaze the entire time – aggressively yanked his black T-shirt up and over his head. "Here," he said, tossing the shirt on the bed, and hooking his thumbs into the belt loops of his jeans in an effort to appear less awkward in his toplessness; for Steve, the effect was something out of those naughty Calvin Klein ads. "See anything you like, Harrington?" Jonathan sneered, with a small smile.

Out of flirtatious one-liners, Steve stood up and closed the distance between himself and his bare-chested study partner. He traced Jonathan's jaw with his thumb for a moment, his breath catching at the sensation of stubble under his fingertips. Steve emitted a small groan as Byers' hands began to roam in his hair, pulling him closer, drawing their lips together. Jonathan whimpered with eagerness, his mouth opening to accept Steve's tongue.

They pulled back from each other and exchanged an astonished look, their passion replaced by a tender shyness.

## 2. Chapter 2

A voice was calling his name; the sound had a far away, under-water quality. "Jonathan." Roused from his thoughts, he saw that Nancy was giving him a confused smile from across the aisle. "Good luck," she mouthed as the teacher placed a test paper face down on each of their desks. Jonathan gave his friend a nervous nod then stole a quick glance two rows over.

Steve caught him looking, and raised a coy eyebrow before giving him an almost imperceptible wink. Heat prickled on the back of Jonathan's neck, and his heart pounded in his ears as he struggled to draw his attention away from the distracting gesture.

"You may begin," Mr. Reilly announced, the sudden swish of paper and manic scribbling bringing Jonathan back to the task at hand.

American history was not a favourite subject, but recollecting names and dates had never presented a challenge. Jonathan finished the test with time to spare, and his mind wandered – as it had many times over the past two days - to the night he spent studying with Steve. A familiar light-headedness overtook him when he recalled the handsome young man, reclined topless across his bed with a mischievous look in his eye.

Jonathan's mind ruminated on the electricity of what followed; his fingers laced in Steve's soft hair, the thrill of warm, eager lips against his own, tongues and teeth and the shared discovery of something exciting and unexpected.

Then Jonathan had ruined the moment by blurting out that maybe they "should get back to studying." He immediately regretted his dreadful timing but Steve, ever the performer, had taken it in stride, his expression switching deftly from surprised pleasure to mock seriousness. "Ah yes, studying. Of course," he smirked, flopping back down on the bed and making a big show of reading over his notes. Less than an hour later, Steve went home with no further mention of their new intimacy.

Now Jonathan stared hard at the clock, willing the bell to ring. If

Steve had ignored him today, or behaved indifferently to his presence, that would have been one thing; he was no stranger to humiliation or rejection. Harrington's playful wink implied something else altogether, leaving Jonathan to oscillate between exhilaration and terror, his instinct fixating on escape.

"Pencils up," Mr. Reilly said, and some of the boys snickered. Jonathan tossed his knapsack over his shoulder and ducked out of the room as inconspicuously as possible, half-running down the hallway to avoid an awkward encounter.

Steve caught up with him in the parking lot as Jonathan was unlocking his car. "Byers!" he grinned, barely winded after sprinting. "Nancy thought you might be sick or something you ran out of there so fast. She said you seemed kind of out of it. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he replied, in a tone harsher than he'd intended. Steve's closeness made him nervous, but the prospect of being left alone felt equally devastating. Eye contact was out of the question. "I finished my test early," he mumbled, fidgeting with his keys. "I just wanted to get out of there as soon as I could."

"Well, good on you. Our study night must have helped," Steve teased, his confidence sexy but infuriating. "We should do it again some time."

"Do what?" Everyone in the parking lot could hear the quickening of his pulse; Jonathan was certain of it. He tried for a severe glare, but was disarmed by Harrington's bewitching brown eyes.

"Study," Steve said, dropping his voice to a whisper, "and admire each other." Jonathan's mouth went dry. Harrington was thoroughly enjoying himself. "You do admire me, don't you, Jonathan?"

"Wow, could you be more into yourself?" Perhaps feigning disgust at Steve's ego would deflect away from this uncomfortable line of questioning.

"That's not all I'm into." A spark of heat against his skin as Harrington brushed his arm with the back of his hand. "What are you doing tonight? We could catch a movie or something."

Steve's touch had a softening effect on Jonathan's defensive nature. "I have to work tonight, but I'm free tomorrow," he said, attempting to disguise his excitement with a cool glance around the parking lot.

"Great," Steve said, smiling broadly. "We'll check out Firestarter. It looks pretty fucked up – so you'll probably love it."

### 3. Chapter 3

The lights went down in the half empty theatre. Steve shifted in his seat and hoped the ensuing darkness would soothe his jangled nerves. Asking Jonathan out had been a bold move, and as they settled themselves in the back row - at a discreet distance from the other cinema patrons - Steve's mind raced with the implications of his decision.

His eyes paced the room and he wondered if any of the audience members intuited that he and Jonathan were anything more than friends. Steve took pride in his self-confidence which made this newfound awkwardness particularly oppressive. He looked over at the handsome blond slouched next to him, expecting to detect some trace of similar anxiety, but Byers was contently taking in the previews, not the least bit concerned about what anyone thought of him or the company he was keeping.

The problem, Steve decided, was Hawkins: a shitty, small-minded town where it was more acceptable for young men to sort out complicated emotions with a fistfight than with a kiss. Having experimented with both approaches, Steve was certain that he preferred the tenderness of Byers' lips to the brutality of his right hook.

The movie had only been running for twenty minutes, but Steve was already restless. He disliked sitting still at the best of times, and Firestarter – although advertised as a thriller – was proving to be dull and poorly paced. To make matters worse, Jonathan was one of those irritating types who could comfortably watch a film in silence.

Steve refused to be bored and quiet at the same time. Giving his reserved companion a nudge, he whispered, “Did you happen to read the book, Byers?”

“Yes,” Jonathan replied, popping a handful of Junior Mints into his mouth, his eyes never leaving the screen.

“Is the book as slow moving as the movie?”



"I don't know. Be quiet."

"That's Gertie from E. T., isn't it?"

"Her name is Drew Barrymore. Stop talking."

Whenever the little girl started blowing stuff up, things became interesting, but the rest of the film was a drag. Not enough action for his tastes. "What this movie needs is Christopher Walken. That guy is freaking intense," he remarked.

Now Byers was actively ignoring him; this was unacceptable. Steve tried a more comedic approach.

"If they dump a bucket of pig's blood on Gertie's head at the end, I'm gonna lose it," he murmured.

"Shut up," Jonathan said, his voice a little high-pitched as he suppressed a chuckle.

"Make me," Steve challenged, mere inches from his companion's ear. Jonathan turned to him and their lips met in a deep, hungry kiss. Harrington gripped Jonathan's shoulder with a bruising intensity and roughly sucked his tongue, relishing the mint chocolate flavor of his mouth. With each breath, he drew Byers closer, resisting a strong urge to crawl right into his lap.

Emboldened by the cover of darkness, Jonathan's hands wandered, first caressing Steve's wrist, then giving his thigh the slightest squeeze before sliding his fingers up under Harrington's rugby jersey and stroking the soft hair on his belly.

Steve bit his lip to keep from audibly groaning as Jonathan's warm mouth grazed his jawline and closed around his earlobe. With each new touch, Steve felt a delicious wave of pleasure, but apprehension was creeping in. "Christ, Byers. Maybe we should slow down..." he gasped.

Jonathan pulled away with a muttered apology.

"Don't be sorry," Steve said softly. "That was just...unexpected."

"I thought this was what people did in the back row of movie theatres."

"It is," Steve admitted. "I've just never done it, you know...with a guy."

He sensed Jonathan retreating, dejected humiliation replacing the brazen lust demonstrated just moments before; Steve hated that he was responsible for this transformation and quickly mustered an explanation for his confusing behaviour.

"Look, Byers, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm pretty used to being in control when I'm..."

"Getting off with someone?" Jonathan offered, with a smirk. His returning good humour was a relief.

"Yeah. I mean, what you were doing felt amazing, but I didn't expect you to be so..."

"Amazing?"

"Yeah."

Jonathan took Steve's hand, their fingers lacing together in the darkness. As they turned their attention back to the film, Steve stole a sidelong glance at the young man by his side. In the glow of the silver screen, Byers' face wore a look of smug satisfaction. This look, combined with the lingering sensation of Jonathan's lips against his skin, sustained Steve for the duration of movie, his mind projecting an endless reel of flesh and fantasy.

## 4. Chapter 4

The cafeteria was crowded and noisy, but Jonathan was too immersed in the saga of Prince Lestat to notice; even Nancy's presence went unperceived until she put down her tray and sat down next to him. "Hey, Jon, is everything alright? It's like you've been hiding from me."

Jonathan looked up, startled. A blush crept across his face as he muttered some incoherent nonsense about scholarship applications and a new photography project.

"You're a terrible liar, you know," Nancy interjected, her tone more sympathetic than her words.

Setting his book aside, Jonathan began to pick the raisins out of his half-eaten bran muffin, eyes fixated on the task.

"Look, Jon, I know about you and Steve, so you can stop ducking into the bathroom every time you see me in the hall."

"He told you." Jonathan's heart hammered against his ribs, but he gathered the courage to face her, bracing himself for an onslaught of shame and accusation.

The kindness in Nancy's eyes caught him off guard. "Yeah, he told me," she said, with a sigh and a little smile. "To be honest, I've had my suspicions about you two for a while." Noting the puzzled look on Jonathan's face, she continued, "You know the only reason he showed up at your place that night was to apologize to you, right? Because he was angry at himself for hurting you."

"Even though..."

"Even though you beat the shit of him." Jonathan couldn't decide whether to be soothed or troubled by Nancy's interpretation of events. He had expected her to be angry, perhaps even disgusted with him, but instead she sat in quiet observation, an enigmatic twinkle in her eye.

Concerned that his friend was more hurt than she was letting on, Jonathan was prepared to make amends. "Nancy, Steve is your boyfriend. I shouldn't have...been with him like that."

"Okay, let's put it this way," Nancy offered. "Maybe we should stop taking this boyfriend-girlfriend stuff so seriously. What do you think?"

"I think this is one of the weirdest conversations I've ever had," he chuckled, incredulous.

"Well, Jonathan, this would certainly not be the first time you underestimated me," Nancy grinned.

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He entered the darkroom, closing the door behind him with a soft click. From one shadowy corner came a low whistle: the peppy chorus of "Girls on Film." Jonathan gave a little yelp but downplayed his alarm, placing his knapsack on the table and rifling for his camera case in the scarlet lamplight. "Steve, what are you doing in here?" he grumbled, without looking up.

"I just wanted to see how things were developing," Harrington quipped, placing a warm hand on the small of Jonathan's back.

"Ugh, that was terrible."

"No need to be so negative," Steve pouted, moving his hand to Jonathan's waist, and tucking a thumb into the belt loop of his jeans.

Jonathan turned to face him then, weakened by the gaze of those brown eyes, charmed by the dreadful puns. "So...you talked to Nancy about...this," he managed, his voice catching on the last word.

"Yeah, she kind of figured it out, actually." Steve's calm demeanour ran counterpoint to Jonathan's punishing anxiety. "I told her that we'd seen a movie together, and when I couldn't tell her how it ended, she started laughing at me. Said she was just relieved that we weren't street fighting anymore."

Harrington's nearness was more than Jonathan could bear,

accelerating his pulse and rendering speech impossible. A trickle of sweat traced a gradual path down his spine as Steve drew closer. Byers' nerves got the best of him. "We can't...the door doesn't lock."

Steve took a step back and raised a sardonic eyebrow, scanning the tiny room for some makeshift locking mechanism. Finding nothing to suit his purpose, Harrington seized the front of Jonathan's T-shirt and manoeuvred his slender body against the door with a rough push.

Jonathan fairly beamed at the sexiness of Steve's easy physicality. "You like it rough do you, Byers?" Harrington teased, gently pinning him to the door at the wrists. Their lips found each other in an aggressive, feverish kiss. Jonathan wrested his hands free and ran his long fingers through Steve's hair, eliciting a soft groan of pleasure.

For a brief moment, Jonathan opened his eyes, enraptured by the surreal red glow of the room, the heat of Steve's mouth on his neck, the erotic thrill of a muscular thigh pressed between his legs. Harrington began to move against him, subtly at first, then with definite purpose.

They were so caught up in each other that it took a few more minutes of cussing and thudding against the door before they noticed the handle being jiggled, accompanied by a muffled shout from the hallway outside.

They disentangled themselves in an instant, smoothing their hair and shirts before opening the door. Mr. Reilly eyed his students with a mixture of concern and anger. "Jonathan, your lip is bleeding! And are those bruises on your neck? What is going on here?" Byers sucked on his bloody lip to suppress a smile.

Mr. Reilly was one of those nerdy types who had never fully gotten over their teenage hatred of jocks. "Steven, if I hear word that you were giving this young man a hard time, I will not hesitate to recommend suspension!"

Harrington's face was the portrait of sincerity. "Yes, sir."

With Reilly safely out of earshot, Jonathan and Steve burst out laughing, each taking a turn sternly threatening the other with a

“hard time,” suspension optional.

## 5. Chapter 5

The door opened and Steve was greeted by the warm, bewildered smile of Joyce Byers; it was more startling than it should have been. In Steve's world, parents were rarely home, let alone present and Joyce is both, her face happily surprised by his arrival, her voice friendly and curious. "Steven! Come on in! Is Jonathan expecting you?"

As she closed the door behind him, Steve caught her stealing a quick glance in the direction of the driveway. She evidently expected to see Nancy in the passenger seat of his BMW. Finding the car vacant, Joyce gave him a bemused look but said nothing.

Steve had arrived a half-hour ahead of schedule hoping that he and Jonathan could fool around for a bit before heading out, but Joyce and her cheerful interrogation threw him off balance. He was stammering something about grabbing a bite to eat when Jonathan strolled into the living room.

His blond hair was towel-dried and unkempt, his slender frame clad in faded black jeans and a white T-shirt that clung to his chest and shoulders where the skin was still damp. He stopped short when he saw Steve. "You're early."

Harrington cocked an eyebrow, biting his lower lip and giving Jonathan an approving once-over that said, "Oh no, Jonny-boy, it looks as though I'm right on time." The non-verbal message was received; Jonathan blushed and looked away to hide his pleased smile. It was a perfect moment until Steve remembered that Joyce had witnessed the whole exchange.

"Well," she said, breaking the awkward silence. "Have a good time, whatever you get up to." Steve couldn't bring himself to look at her, but he could easily envision the knowing grin on her face as she wandered out of the room, leaving the boys to share a look of wide-eyed relief.

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Steve was about to turn the key in the ignition but reconsidered and, placed a hand on his date's knee, leaning in for a kiss. Jonathan scowled, gesturing towards the house with a slight nod, and Harrington retreated with a sigh. "Your mom's pretty nosy, huh?"

"She's protective, if that's what you mean." Jonathan's terse correction reminded Steve to tread carefully around the topic of Byers' family.

When he started the car, the radio is blasted "Love is a Battlefield" at full volume and Steve moved to turn it down. Jonathan did one better, producing a cassette tape from the pocket of his jacket and inserting it into the player just as Pat Benetar was launching into her overwrought chorus. The tape hissed for a few seconds before a sharp, jangly guitar filled the space; soon a lilting falsetto began to croon. I would go out tonight but I haven't got a stitch to wear... It was unlike anything Steve had ever heard, and he liked it immediately.

"Do you always carry a mix tape for hijacking the car stereos of others?"

"Top 40 radio makes my ears bleed. Besides, if you're going to insist on driving, I insist on not being tormented by garbage pop rock."

It's true that Steve had been adamant about picking Jonathan up at his house rather than meeting downtown as they had for their cinema rendezvous. He'd reasoned that the evening would feel more like a date that way.

They pulled into the parking lot of Hawkins' only pizzeria, and secured the last spot. "It's pretty busy," Jonathan observed, glancing around. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

Harrington shut off the car. "Byers, we can't sneak around all the time. No one will even notice us, provided that you can resist the urge to put your tongue down my throat between bites of garlic bread."

"Ew. Shut up."



“What, you don’t like garlic bread?”

Exasperated silence.

“Because I know you like putting your tongue in my mouth...”

Jonathan lunged at him as if to throw a punch, but instead grabbed Steve’s jacket by the shoulder, pulling him in for a brief hot kiss then drawing back with a grin. “You talk shit just so I’ll shut you up, don’t you?”

Harrington shrugged. “What can I say? Guilty as charged.”

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They were seated in a corner booth of the restaurant, a large room dimly lit by old-fashioned stained glass lamps hanging low over each table. Jonathan fidgeted with the straw in his cola, his eyes ceaselessly shifting around the space. Steve wanted nothing more than to reach out and take his hand; it was frustrating that under the circumstances, a gesture intended to give comfort would only aggravate his companion’s anxious state.

“Hey,” he said softly, and Byers turned to him with a stricken look. “Everything’s cool, alright? As far as anyone else is concerned, we’re just a couple of guys out for pizza.” Dropping his voice to a whisper, he added, “Nobody here has any idea about the things that went through my mind when I saw you in that wet T-shirt.”

Jonathan smiled in spite of himself. “What kinds of things?”

“Let’s just say that if your mom hadn’t been home, I would have... eaten this whole pizza by myself.” The waitress’ arrival interrupted Steve’s salacious chatter, and a tray of pepperoni pizza was set down between them.

They ate in silence until Steve got bored. “You see, the thing I don’t get,” he remarked, around a mouthful of crust, “is that I thought you were one of those guys who didn’t give a shit what people thought of you, and now here you are more worried about it than I am.”

“You don’t know what it’s like to have been called a queer since

before you even knew the meaning of the word,” Jonathan muttered.

“Well, you clearly haven’t met my father,” Steve pointed out, taking a swig of the beer the waitress had brought without carding him. “That asshole never misses an opportunity to tell me that I style my hair like a faggot.”

“Christ, it sounds like your dad and my dad should get together and share a pizza,” Jonathan smirked. “Lonnie’s convinced that no ‘real man’ hates baseball, so naturally I’m a big disappointment.”

Steve gasped in mock outrage. “Wait – you hate baseball? I don’t think this is going to work out. I mean, what the hell is wrong with you?”

“Not everyone can swing a bat like you, Steve Harrington.” Jonathan’s tone was unexpectedly playful.

“Byers, are you flirting with me?”

There was a bold look in Jonathan’s enigmatic brown eyes, a sexy smirk playing on his lips. In a surprise reversal of roles, Steve was blushing.

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Jonathan refused to be walked to the front door, flouting Steve’s attempt at dating etiquette with a sneer. Instead they sat in the car, trying to discern if the darkened windows of the Byers’ residence mean that Joyce was asleep or spying. Steve yawned, stretched and brought one arm to rest across Jonathan’s shoulders; it was an old trick, but it worked, and Byers relaxed into his touch.

He drew Jonathan close, holding his shy gaze and tracing a path along the blond’s cheekbone with his thumb. When Steve spoke, his voice was barely a whisper. “You have no idea how gorgeous you are, do you?”

Byers didn’t roll his eyes, or make a snarky comment. He just smiled and turned up the volume on the mix tape that has been a mere murmur in the background. Joan Jett’s “Crimson & Clover.” The raw guitar and laconic vocal provided a raunchy backdrop as Jonathan

planted a gentle kiss on Steve's mouth, and they soon struck a familiar rhythm, steaming up the windows of the BMW as the music vibrated around them.

Hands began to wander, and Steve's pulse was racing with anticipation but Jonathan suddenly pulled away, his eyes on the headlights turning into the driveway. "Shit! It's the cops!" Harrington hissed, adjusting himself to hide his arousal.

"It's Hopper," Jonathan mumbled, zipping up his jacket and moving to get out of the car.

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"No, it isn't. Look, I've gotta go." With a warm glance and a nod, Jonathan got out. Steve promised to call just as Byers was closing the door. Hopper had gotten out of his truck, and Steve watched with some curiosity as the two entered the house together.

Harrington was about to back out of the driveway when he remembered the mix tape in his cassette deck. He hit 'eject' and examined the tape closely in the moonlight, his heart skipping when he read the label, written in Jonathan's neat hand: "For Steve, This Charming Man."

## 6. Chapter 6

Jonathan was on the brink of nodding off when he heard the tapping. At first he mistook the noise for those last twitches of static before the turntable arm lifted and returned to its cradle, but when he removed his headphones, he heard the sound again; it was coming from the window.

He flicked on the bedside lamp and approached the source with caution, picking up a hefty textbook from his desk in case self-defense should prove necessary. He pushed aside the curtain – a bed sheet, really - peered out into the darkness, and could just make out the features of Steve Harrington, half-hidden in shadow.

Byers tossed the book back on the desk and unlatched the window. His unexpected guest made quick work of climbing into the bedroom. “My mom would have let you in if you’d come to the front door,” Jonathan whispered.

Steve, visibly agitated, began to pace the room, refusing to meet Byers’ gaze. “I know, I just didn’t want her to see...” Harrington trailed off, and at last turned to his bewildered host, revealing a face streaked with tears, a fresh bruise along his temple.

“Oh my God,” Jonathan breathed. “What the hell happened?”

There was a pause while Steve collected himself. “My parents were really getting into it tonight...you know, drunk, screaming at each other. My dad started getting in my mom’s face and I fucking hate that. I got between them and he shoved me.” Steve sank down on the bed, sobbing. Jonathan froze, unsure whether to offer comfort or space at such a vulnerable moment.

Steve looked up. “You’re probably wondering why I didn’t go to Nancy’s place, huh?” he sniffled, wiping his eyes on the sleeve of his sweatshirt. Jonathan maintained his stunned silence and Harrington continued, “Nancy always tries to make me feel better - which is great sometimes, but... right now I feel like shit, and I just want to feel like that for a while. Does that make any sense?”

Byers nodded. "I get like that sometimes."

"I've noticed," Steve said, with a sad smile. "Look, do you mind if I hang out here for a bit? I'll be gone by morning, I swear."

"No, I don't mind – I mean, yeah, that'd be fine. We just need to be..." Jonathan sputtered, elation and apprehension at odds with each other. Standing there in just his boxers and T-shirt, he regretted that he wasn't better covered; any minute now Steve would become all too aware of the effect his presence was having.

By way of distraction, Byers wandered to the record player, settling the needle into a groove with trembling hands. "My mom's in the next room, so we probably shouldn't do...anything," he said, carefully. "We can talk, though - with the music on." He unplugged his headphones from the system, and a Roxy Music ballad began to drift quietly from the stereo speakers.

"Okay, that's cool," Steve said, kicking off his Nikes. His melancholy was lifting at the prospect of spending the night, and there was a suggestive twinkle in his eye as he stood up and divested himself of his sweatshirt. "Just let me get comfortable," he muttered as he nonchalantly removed his track pants and tossed them aside, giving Jonathan a look of feigned innocence. "There. Now, what do you want to talk about?"

Seeing Harrington stripped down to his briefs and mesh Colts jersey, Jonathan felt hot all over. He couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs to speak; his body had many things it wanted to say but lacked the language to get its message across.

Steve collapsed onto the bed, propped his head up on one elbow, and gave Jonathan a hungry glance. "Come here."

The words jarred Byers from his paralytic state - he could move again, breathe again – and with a coy smile he approached the bed. Steve took his hand and in one swift motion, pulled Jonathan down on top of him. The mattress creaked, and the headboard thudded with a single knock against the wall. Byers cursed under his breath. "We need to be really quiet," he murmured, struggling to keep the panic out of his voice.

“Shut up, then.”

Jonathan brought his lips down hard onto Steve’s smug mouth, deepening the kiss then stopping to gasp as the strong hands that gripped his back began to massage his rear. Harrington shifted his body so that Byers was lying between his legs, and with a couple of upward hip thrusts nudged his inexperienced lover into action.

Both moaned quietly as they began to move together, Jonathan grinding himself against Steve’s arousal, the layers of fabric between them adding delicious friction. In the interest of discretion, they kept their movements small and concentrated, each minute squeak of the box spring eliciting a shiver of exquisite tension.

Byers closed his eyes, relishing the hot pulse of Harrington panting beneath him, shivering at the sound of his name being whispered like an incantation as Steve peaked. “Jon. Jonathan. Jonathan.” Soon after, Byers fell across Steve’s chest, flushed and spent.

“Holy shit,” Harrington remarked, chuckling as Jonathan rolled onto his back on the narrow bed. They lay beside each other grinning for several minutes before Jonathan stood up and went to his dresser in search of clean underwear. “That’s very practical of you, Byers. Not very romantic, but practical.”

“Fuck off,” Jonathan muttered, the smile not leaving his face. “I’ve never done this before.”

“Neither have I.”

“No, I mean, I haven’t...ever.” Byers felt suddenly shy, as though confessing hadn’t been his idea.

“Well, I liked it. And I really like you,” Steve said softly. Jonathan blushed, and with an awkward nod, left the room to wash up.

When he returned, Steve was sleeping, curled up on the bed in his track pants. Byers put out the light, and climbed into bed, pulling the quilt up over the both of them and nestling himself against Steve’s body. “I really like you, too,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. Harrington slipped an arm around Jonathan’s waist and gave a little

laugh. He hadn't been sleeping after all.

## 7. Chapter 7

Morning arrived, and muted daylight made its way across the room. Steve squinted against the bright and turned over on his stomach, pressing his face into the pillow and inhaling a familiar, alpine scent: Jonathan.

A strange current coursed through Harrington's body as he recalled the events of the previous night: equal parts anguish and pleasure. The shock of pain as his father slammed him into the living room wall contrasted with the relative numbness he'd felt driving through the night down a highway distorted by tears. Shivering in the damp outside the Byers' house was eclipsed by the tranquility and warmth within the dim-lit bedroom, relief punctuated by the sincere concern on Jonathan's handsome face.

Steve's mind was just beginning to picture the lusty bliss of what came next when his heart sank; he had overslept. Reaching a blind hand across the mattress, he was duly alarmed to find Jonathan gone. Joyce might be questioning her son at this very moment about the conspicuous BMW in her driveway.

Steve leapt up from the bed in a fit of anxiety, hands in his hair, scanning the room for his belongings. Having at last gathered his clothing, he dressed quickly, muttering obscenities all the while, and with a disgusted grimace, balled up his discarded underwear before jamming them into the pocket of his sweatshirt.

Not wanting to make a bad situation worse, Steve went to the window and was preparing to make an unobtrusive exit when he heard the bedroom door open. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," Byers said, with surprising calm. "Hopper just pulled up."

"Jesus Christ!" Harrington exclaimed, wild-eyed. "Your mom called the...."

"I told you, it's not like that. He and my mom are" – /p>

"Screwing?"



“Seeing each other.”

“Look, Byers, I’m really sorry. Your mom’s probably already given you shit, so I’m just gonna” –

“She’s fine. I told her about you and your parents.” By his tone, Jonathan didn’t seem to register the gravity of what he was saying. “Don’t worry,” he went on. “She’s not going to bring it up or anything. My mom knows what it’s like to feel unsafe...at home.”

A sad, almost comforting silence descended as they acknowledged their shared wretchedness, but even with the assurance of Joyce’s sympathy, Steve remained intent on escape. He was about to make his awkward departure via the bedroom door when Jonathan blocked his path and announced that he was making breakfast.

“Are you kidding me right now, Byers?”

“No. Seriously, how do you like your eggs?”

“The same way I like you,” Steve said sweetly.

“Stop.”

“Over hard.”

Jonathan’s eyebrows shot up, and he mouthed the word “wow,” scrunching his face in a prudish wince.

Harrington was glad to be having fun again. “I’d take you over easy, too, though,” he offered, with a wink.

Byers shook his head with an irrepressible grin, turned on his heel and left the room to prepare his meal.

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As he sat down to breakfast with the Byers’, it occurred to Steve how rarely he shared a meal with anyone at home. It seemed that he was always alone: at the kitchen counter wolfing down a bowl of Lucky

Charms before practice, or sprawled out on the couch, eating microwaved pizza and watching Wheel of Fortune. His loneliness had become so ritualized that until now he'd ceased to think about it.

Jonathan set a plate down in front of him, and Harrington nearly burst out laughing when he noticed that his were the only eggs that had been prepared over easy. He tried to catch Byers' eye, but Jonathan was being predictably inscrutable. Steve instead turned his attention to the others around the table: Joyce stirring sugar into her coffee, Will piling scrambled eggs onto a slice of toast, Hopper gnawing on a piece of crisped bacon.

Harrington picked up a piece of toast and pierced one runny yolk, trying to act naturally. He couldn't shake the feeling that everyone was staring at him, particularly Will, who was on the verge of giggles. "How do you get your hair to do that?" he asked.

"I, uh, just woke up like this," Steve explained, avoiding all eye contact and hoping that he wouldn't have to clarify exactly how he "just woke up" in the Byers' house.

"It makes you look kind of punk," Will grinned. "Don't you think, Jon?"

"Yeah," his older brother agreed, and when Steve looked up, he saw that Jonathan was beaming across the table at him. This is Byers in his natural habitat, Harrington thought. At ease, amused, responsive: all the things he was too self-conscious to be in the Real World.

"That's quite the bruise," Hopper noted, gesturing at Steve's startled face with his fork. Joyce rested a subtle, warning hand on the Chief's arm, which put an end to the verbal inquiry but not to Hopper's look of scrutiny.

"Rugby," Steve blurted, shovelling a final forkful of egg into his mouth and jumping up from the table. "This has been so great, but I really have to get going."

Harrington staggered out of the kitchen but Jonathan chased him to the front door and barred the exit. "He didn't mean anything by it, you know," he said, keeping his voice low. "He's just concerned. And

he's a cop – asking questions is what he does.”

“I know, it's just that” – Steve stopped abruptly, a lump forming in his throat. He closed his eyes against the tears that he feared were coming, and was surprised to find himself in Jonathan's arms. He relaxed into the embrace and brought his hands up to rest on Byers' waist.

Forgetting for the moment where he was and who might be watching, Steve kissed Jonathan tenderly on the mouth. Once. Twice. Their lips met for a third time before Byers drew back, a shy smile on his face.

Will's delighted laughter broke the spell, and they turned in unison to see Joyce, Hopper and the youngest Byers standing in the living room, regarding them with a mixture of surprise and amusement.

“Okay,” Steve announced, with a nervous chuckle. “Thank you again for breakfast! I'd better be going.” With a little wave, he pulled open the door, grateful that Jonathan was too stunned to stop him this time.

“Uh, Steve,” Joyce whispered, pointing at the floor by his feet. “Are those yours?”

Jonathan cursed under his breath.

Mortified, Harrington hastily collected his underwear and shoved them back into his pocket. He managed to keep his composure as he left the house but broke into a run the minute he got outside.

Steve was just about to start his car when he saw Hopper approaching the driver's side, lighting a cigarette and looking impossibly casual given the circumstances. Harrington rolled down the window and the Chief bent down, holding Steve's gaze. “Steven,” he said kindly, taking a drag. “No one plays rugby at this time of year. It's baseball season. Your old man...he's what I like to call a ‘person of interest.’ You know what I mean. If you ever need me to drop by and have a talk with him, you just give the word, understand?”

Harrington breathed a sigh of relief, and couldn't stop smiling as he pulled out of the driveway.

## 8. Chapter 8

“Come in,” Jonathan mumbled as he drew the razor along his jawline with a careful hand. Will entered and for a moment stood in quiet awe watching his brother shave. The older boy drained the sink, examined himself in the mirror, and awaited his sibling’s inevitable interrogation.

“You going out somewhere?” Will asked, picking at some peeling paint on the doorframe in an effort to appear casual.

“Uh-huh.”

“Mom says you’re going to a baseball game. Is that true?”

Jonathan rolled his eyes and dried his face, groaning inwardly at his mother’s “honesty is the best policy” attitude.

“Don’t you hate baseball?” Will continued, with a knowing smile. “Didn’t you say once that it was just one of those stupid things that people think you should like?” Jonathan groaned inwardly at his own “honesty is the best policy” attitude.

“Well, all I can say is that Steve must be a pretty good kisser if he’s convinced Jonathan “Baseball Sucks” Byers to go to a ball game,” the younger Byers snickered before dashing out of the room to avoid being whipped by a damp towel.

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Attending the game had been Nancy’s idea. “It would mean a lot to him if you were there,” she insisted. “Besides, you really should see him play – even if you don’t care much for baseball, he’s a lot of fun to watch. You’ll see.”

Jonathan had his reservations as the three of them headed to the park in Steve’s car. Riding shotgun, Byers fought the intense desire to hit eject as Van Halen’s ‘Panama’ roared from the speakers. “It’s my pump-up song, Jonny!” Steve shouted over the guitar solo. “I’ve been listening to it before every game this season - it would be bad luck if I

made today an exception.”

They pulled up to Hawkins’ only stoplight as David Lee Roth started his spoken word bit. Harrington put a hand on Jonathan’s arm to get his attention then held his gaze with a sultry stare, mouthing the lyrics: “We’re runnin’ a bit hot tonight / I can hardly see the road from the heat comin’ off it / As you reach down between my legs...”

“Good lord,” Jonathan muttered with a scowl, plucking Steve’s hand from his knee and placing it back on the gearshift. He stole a look at Nancy in the backseat, but she was pretending to stare out the window, a hand clamped over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

Seated in the bleachers along the first base line, Jonathan admitted to Nancy that she had been right. You didn’t have to be a sports fan to discern that Steve was an impressive ball player, possessing power and grace in equal measure. Byers could hardly take his eyes off of the handsome shortstop as he moved about the field with a magical elegance, dipping to scoop up a grounder then twisting his body with calculated precision, and lobbing the ball to first to end the inning.

“I used to come to the games just to check out his ass in that uniform,” Nancy grinned. “But now more than anything, I just love to watch him play.”

“Well, you weren’t wrong about the uniform,” Byers murmured absently. Steve was warming up in the batter’s box, arching his back in a stretch with the bat across his shoulders before taking a few practice swings. “He knows we’re watching him, doesn’t he?” Jonathan chuckled.

“Oh God, what was your first clue?” Nancy giggled as Steve made a big show of bending over to re-tie his cleats before taking the plate. He blew a bubble with his gum, sucked it back into his mouth and winked in Nancy and Jonathan’s direction. “He’s really pulling out all the stops for you tonight,” she observed. “I mean, he always enjoys an audience, but this performance is...exceptional.”

With an explosive crack, Steve hit a line drive to the corner, knocking in two runs. Nothing could have wiped the smile from Jonathan’s

face.

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The original plan had been to head to Steve's house after the game for beers and a swim, but as they climbed into the car, Nancy announced that she had a date, and asked to be dropped off at the movies. The young men exchanged a brief, stupefied glance but made no comment and delivered their friend to her destination.

Now Jonathan was struggling to relax as he settled into a deck chair beside the Harringtons' pool. It was surreal to be in this particular backyard at night, and he was still shaking unhappy memories from his mind when Steve came out of the dark house and handed him a beer. "Did you enjoy the game, Byers?"

Jonathan cracked open the can and took a sip. He would have preferred a soda but the evening was warm and humid enough to make any refreshment welcome. "I liked it more than I expected to," he confessed, slow to stroke Harrington's ego. "You've got a pretty good team."

"C'mon, Byers, you can do better than that."

"Okay. You were incredible. I can see why you enjoy it so much." The beer was going down a lot easier than he'd expected it to, and a slight buzz was beginning to chip away at Jonathan's initial apprehension. He stood up, explaining that he had to change into his trunks, and headed into the house.

When he returned, a portable cassette deck was playing track five of Steve's mix tape - the Cure's "Let's Go to Bed" - such an unmistakably suggestive choice that Byers half-expected to find Harrington swimming laps in the nude. It was both a relief and a disappointment to discover that his host had put on a swimsuit, even if the suit itself was far from modest: a turquoise European-style number resembling a pair of boxer shorts that had been shrunk in the dryer.

Jonathan knew that he was staring but couldn't help himself: Steve was beautiful. Pleased with the effect his skimpy attire was having on Byers' composure, Harrington set down his beer and turned toward the pool, casting his companion a final hot look over a freckled

shoulder before taking a short running leap and executing a perfect dive into the water.

It was a tough act to follow and Jonathan didn't even try, opting instead to perch on the pool's edge with his feet in the water while he worked up the courage to jump in. A familiar dread crept up: desire fraught with anxiety, the near constant fear that he would do or say the wrong thing.

Harrington surfaced, treading water. "Christ, Byers, you look like you're about to cry over there. What's the matter?" He swam to Jonathan and stood between his knees in the chest-deep water. With a salacious smile playing on his lips, he placed his wet hands on Byers' thighs, his fingers inching their way up the legs of his bathing suit. "Do you want me to pull you in...or would you prefer if I just pulled these off?"

Both options were enticing but the open air and sinister-looking woods surrounding the yard gave Jonathan pause. Everything felt exposed somehow, and it occurred to him how ruefully ironic it was to suspect a voyeur in the darkness. Attempting a nonchalant chuckle, he pushed Steve's hands away and heaved himself into the pool.

The cold water was invigorating and Byers soon relinquished his fear, slipping under the surface and swimming a length along the bottom of the pool. Blondie's "Atomic" began to play as he came up for air at the water's edge. He had barely a moment for recovery before a hot breath was tickling the back of his neck. "Thanks for coming today," Steve said, amid kisses along Jonathan's shoulders. "I know how much you love baseball."

"It was fine. It was good. I liked it." Words failed him as Byers rested his arms on the pool ledge and surrendered to his lover's explorations: gasping as a warm tongue lapped a rivulet of water from between his shoulder blades, emitting a groan as Harrington's fingers teased his nipples and began to stroke his belly, following the trail of soft hair that continued below the waistband of his swimsuit.

Lips brushed his ear, whispering his name as though it were a wish. Jonathan could only manage a strangled "please" as a hand was



slipped down the front of his trunks and closed around his hardness.

Steve's less occupied fingers traced Byers' collarbone, grasping his bicep, and drawing their bodies closer together, while the hand inside his shorts found a rhythm that compelled Jonathan to short, uneven breaths. Harrington pressed himself against his lover's behind, and bit down gently on his shoulder. Byers exhaled in a series of staggered bursts as he came, whimpering such that he was grateful for the noise of the stereo.

Jonathan turned to Steve with the hope of a kiss and a chance to return the favour, but the sound of a gate unlatching shocked them apart. A familiar teenager appeared by the pool and it was clear that something was wrong. "Troy? What are you doing home?" Steve asked, treading water as far away from Jonathan as possible.

"I live here," Troy slurred. "Who the fuck is this?"

"Have you been drinking?" Harrington's voice had softened with concern, but Troy ignored him, fixing his bleary gaze on Jonathan.

"Hey, I know you. Your brother's that little homo that almost died. Are you a homo, too? Steve, I'd get out of the pool before he turns you into a..." He hiccupped and swayed in the direction of the house, stopping to wretch in a potted plant before going inside.

Steve scrambled out of the pool and wrapped a towel around his waist. "I'd better go check on him." When he returned a short while later, Byers was already dressed. Harrington handed him the keys to the BMW and explained that Troy had passed out. "I can't leave him like this. You understand, right?"

Jonathan understood well enough that he was unsurprised to find his eyes pricking with tears as he put Steve's car in gear and made his way home.

## 9. Chapter 9

Reluctant to leave Troy's side, Steve attempted to make himself comfortable on the living room sofa. For a long time he was too anxious to rest. When sleep did come, it was fraught with confusing, unpleasant dreams.

One moment he was swimming in a placid pool, the next he was being pulled beneath the surface with gut-wrenching force. He struggled for air, thrashing against his unseen enemy until an eerie serenity ensued. He felt warm hands on his face, coaxing his weakened body to the surface. The invisible adversary defeated, tender lips caressed his own and he grew heady with the scent of Love's Baby Soft.

Just as Steve was relaxing into Nancy's touch, he was once again dragged down into the deep, his opponent stronger this time and somehow more familiar. On the verge of tears, he was seized by the shoulders and ruthlessly shaken, his father's whisky-tinged breath stinging his eyes and turning his stomach, even as firm fingers were grasping his arm and yanking him from the suffocating water.

A warm mouth closed over his gasping lips, breathing fresh air into his lungs then withdrawing to whisper into his ear, "We can go wherever we please /and everything depends upon / how near you stand to me." Steve's heart raced as Jonathan began to kiss his neck but soon Troy's disgusted voice was interrupting his pleasure: "You're one of them, aren't you? I knew it."

The hurtful words were still echoing in his mind as Steve became aware of another distinct sound. The phone was ringing, its digital gurgle so close at his ear that it seemed to emanate from within his skull. He stretched, his eyes flying open at the unexpected sensation of cool leather against his bare skin.

It was morning and he was back in the living room with Troy, who continued to snore on the nearby loveseat. The elder Harrington sat up, pushed aside the damp towel he'd been using as a pillow and tugged the vibrating receiver from between the sofa cushions, pressing the talk button. "Harrington residence," he announced,

trying for an alertness that he wasn't feeling, and praying to God that it wasn't his father on the line.

"Steve?" Jonathan's tone was all concern, as unnerving as it was sweet.

Steve breathed a silent sigh of relief. "Hey, Byers, how's it going?" he drawled, yawning into the phone to establish a façade of calm.

"My mom and I are going to bring your car around, if that's all right. Will you be home for the next fifteen minutes or so?" Byers sounded confused by Harrington's casual tone, but didn't question it.

Steve stood and placed a gentle hand on his brother's forehead. No fever, no damp. "Yeah. Totally. Come on by," he said softly into the phone, then hung up.

"Troy. Troy, wake up. You've got to take these," he whispered, nudging the boy awake and gesturing at the aspirin and water that had gone untouched on the coffee table from the previous night.

The boy squinted at his older brother with a disoriented, unhappy look, and Steve half-expected to be subject to more of the verbal nastiness from his nightmare. Instead, Troy's face crumpled and he burst into tears.

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Steve had just gotten his troubled brother settled in bed when the doorbell rang. Clad in only his pajama bottoms, he debated throwing on a T-shirt but reconsidered on the off chance that his toplessness would prove distracting enough to spare him an interrogation by Jonathan. His day had already started terribly, the last thing he needed now was to have an emotional breakdown on his front porch.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and greeted Byers with a forced smile meant to convey a specific message: "I'm fine. You're fine. Everything's fine." By the sadness in Jonathan's eyes, it was clear that Steve was deceiving no one.

"Hey," Byers said quietly, hands jammed into the pockets of his jacket. "How is...everything?"

Steve exhaled, buying himself some time with a glance at the rusty Pinto parked in his driveway. Joyce gave a little wave through the windshield, and he brought two fingers to his brow in a shy salute.

Turning to meet Jonathan's expectant gaze, Harrington sighed and briefly relayed Troy's version of events from the previous night: meeting up with a couple guys at the arcade, plans for a sleepover at Dylan's house shelved when an older boy produced a half-empty bottle of vodka from his knapsack. Between the four of them, the boys succeeded in polishing off the booze in the back alley and Troy had made his slow way home, throwing up every few blocks.

"Jesus," Jonathan muttered. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, he's going to be all right," Steve replied, as much to convince himself as anyone else.

"No, I mean, you – are you okay?" Byers corrected, moving to place his hand on Steve's bare shoulder then - seeming to recall Joyce in the waiting car - reconsidered and shoved it back into his pocket. "I know if Will did something like that I'd be...pretty messed up."

"Yeah, mostly I'm just dreading my parents coming home and finding out...somehow this will end up being my fault and then...." Steve didn't elaborate, but judging by Jonathan's somber nod he understood.

Byers produced a set of car keys from his pocket and handed them over, his fingers deliberately lingering against Steve's palm. "I have to work this afternoon," he said gently. "But maybe tonight, I mean, if you're not busy..." Jonathan caressed Steve's wrist with his thumb and gave him a last meaningful look before heading down the steps to his mom's car.

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The Harringtons arrived home less than an hour later, too consumed with bickering to pay their sons much mind. Predicting that this inattention would be short-lived, Steve seized on the one activity that always cleared his head: he went for a run.

Even the anticipation of a good sprint triggered a sort of catharsis for him: the cool nylon of his track shorts, the threadbare Springsteen T-shirt he reserved for just this purpose, the determination with which he laced up his Nikes.

Despite his dark mood, Harrington managed a smile as he popped a particular cassette into his Walkman – the mixtape that had miraculously appeared in his locker just last week. He recalled with fondness the sour sneer of disdain on Jonathan's face when he learned that Steve was wearing out a favourite running tape with repeated listens of "Don't Stop Believing."

The new mixtape was entitled "Running Away from the Journey" – a testament to Jonathan's dry sense of humour - and the lead-off track was Billy Idol's "Dancing With Myself." The rollicking opening riff blared from his headphones and Steve set out with no particular destination in mind. He would simply run until he didn't have to anymore, and then he would turn back.

After twenty minutes at a steady dash, he was unsurprised to find himself standing at the end of the Byers' driveway. Although he knew that Jonathan wasn't home, it would feel good to cool his heels on friendly ground before heading home to confront whatever hostility awaited him there.

He stopped short as he approached the house. Will was sitting on the front step, elbows on his knees, his chin resting in his hands, a dejected expression on his face. He brightened a little when he noticed Steve, calling to him and explaining with some regret that Jonathan wasn't home.

Harrington wiped the sweat from his brow with the front of his T-shirt. "I know. I was just out for a run. Are you alright?" he managed, still catching his breath.

"Oh, I'm waiting for my Dad," Will replied with a wan smile.

Before Steve could respond, Joyce's angry voice was heard through the screen door. "Lonnie, would it really hurt you to be on time for a change?" She stormed out onto the porch, clapping a hand to her mouth when she realized her mistake. "Oh shit, Steve, I'm sorry! I

thought you were...someone else.”

“It’s fine. Really,” Harrington assured her, trying to decide how long to linger with mother and son in this awkward moment.

From within the house, the phone began to ring. Joyce scowled, guessing at the identity of the caller, and went inside. Soon the ringing ceased and one half of a heated argument commenced.

“He’s not coming,” the younger boy remarked, almost to himself. He stood up, gave the front step a single hard kick and moved to go indoors. On impulse, he turned to Steve, “Can you wait here? I’ll be right back.”

When he returned, Will was carrying a chilled glass of Tang and a bright red Frisbee. He handed the cold drink to Harrington with a shy grin, and mimed a flick of the disc. “I don’t have any plans. Do you?”

Will giggled as Steve downed the Tang like he was shotgunning a beer, and set the glass down on the porch with a soft thud. “Well,” Harrington announced, snatching the disc from the boy’s hand and jogging across the lawn. “I do plan to give you the run of your life! Go long, Byers!”

## 10. Chapter 10

His shift ended at eight o'clock, and after several hours of work at an understaffed lumberyard functioning as a human forklift, Jonathan's body felt three times its age. He had promised himself that he would pick up as many shifts as possible. His barely-breathing Ford needed a new muffler and besides, Joyce could always use help with groceries or some other household necessity. The weight of these thoughts pressed down on his already weary shoulders as Byers shrugged out of his sweat-stained uniform and pulled on a clean T-shirt before sliding behind the wheel.

He was halfway home before he remembered the call he'd intended to make. Dialing the number inside a gas station phone booth, he resisted the urge to lean his aching back against the grimy glass.

Steve picked up on the third ring, mumbling "Harrington residence" in a tone of undisguised boredom.

"Hey, it's me," Jonathan said, a familiar flutter in his chest. "Is this a bad time?"

"Byers! Thank God it's you!" Harrington exclaimed. "There's something – an entity! – inside my TV and it...wants out!" These last words were whispered with a dramatic urgency dissolving into a chuckle. He cleared his throat for effect. "But seriously, man, Poltergeist is on cable and it's scaring the shit out of me. Do you want to come over?"

Steve's good humour was irresistible. Putting aside his exhaustion, Byers agreed to come by.

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As his car rumbled to a stop in front of the Harrington house, Jonathan was certain that people were glaring at him from their windows, cursing the loser who dared drive his rusted junk heap through their quiet, affluent neighbourhood. Taking a deep breath, he strode up the walkway and rang the doorbell, making a mental note of the maroon Cadillac parked in the drive. After his miserable encounter with Steve's little brother the previous evening, he was

disinclined to make the acquaintance of another member of the household just yet.

Scurrying footsteps could be heard within and the door was tugged open a few inches. A startled brown eye appeared, plucked brows raised, manicured nails gripping the door's edge. Mrs. Harrington gave Jonathan a quick once-over, taking in his clean shirt, mostly clean jeans, and the grease-stained pizza box he was holding. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said, politely. "You must be mistaken. We didn't order any takeout."

Jonathan shifted on his feet, contemplating a muttered apology and a swift return to his car. A second set of footsteps approached from beyond the door. "Steven," Mrs. Harrington stage-whispered. "Did you order a pizza, honey?"

The door fell open and Steve came into view, a look of mild shock on his face. Clearly it hadn't occurred to him that his mother might answer the bell when Jonathan arrived, and he stared for a moment in silent mortification before launching into an unrehearsed explanation. "He's mine!" he blurted, gesturing in Jonathan's direction and wincing at his choice of words. Harrington's gaze fell on the pizza then flicked back to his awkward guest. "I mean...this is mine," he corrected. "The food. But he's here for me, too...a friend. From school. Jonathan - this is my mom. Mom, this is Jonathan."

Steve gave his stunned mother a broad, reassuring smile - as though she were the one making a blithering idiot of herself - and gently took the pizza box from Byers' shaking hands.

Jonathan pressed his lips together to keep from laughing and nodded sheepishly at Mrs. Harrington before following his host out of the foyer. "We'll just be downstairs watching TV, Mom!" Steve called over his shoulder. "You won't even know we're here!"

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The Harringtons' over-stuffed sectional threatened to devour Jonathan the minute he sat down, but it was far from the most



excessive furnishing in the space: a wall-spanning big-screen TV, fully-stocked bar, and expansive snooker table filled out the substantial room. The walls and mantles featured more Indianapolis Colts merchandise than any rational person need possess.

Curious as he was about the sizeable collection of LPs displayed in the wall unit next to the high-end sound system, Jonathan's hunger got the best of him. He was already starting on his third slice of pepperoni by the time Steve settled down beside him, bearing drinks and paper napkins from behind the bar. Byers observed with a slight smile that Harrington had remembered his preference for soda, handing him an ice-cold Pepsi before cracking open a Budweiser for himself.

Steve took a long swig of his beer, sighing with profound satisfaction. "Christ, what a day."

Jonathan chewed and nodded while Harrington described the "fiasco" with Troy, explaining that he'd managed to dodge initial parental drama with an artfully timed run. "I also got in a fun little round of Frisbee with Will, which was nice. Then I ran home, and my parents lost their minds like they always do. The end." Steve took a bite of pizza and gave a silly bow.

"You saw Will?" Byers replied, his mood darkening. "I guess Lonnie didn't show up after all, that son of a bitch."

Steve was quick to take the conversation in a different direction. "Your brother's great, by the way. I feel like such a shit, you know, for all the times I called you a freak. Your family is way more normal than mine."

Jonathan considered telling Steve the truth; that Joyce didn't sleep unless Hopper was there to comfort away her nightmares, that since Will's return from the Upside Down, he was often withdrawn and morose. Instead Byers sipped his Pepsi and mumbled something about normal being "overrated."

They drank and ate in silence for a while, letting the film distract them from their respective troubles. Jonathan noticed that Steve, seated at a barely platonic distance on the couch, kept finding ways

to touch him – a thigh grazing his own, seizing his shoulder at an on-screen jump scare then idly throwing his arm across Jonathan's shoulders, fingers toying with the hair at the nape of his neck.

Harrington's caresses put Byers at ease and sleepiness overwhelmed him. In time, not even the creeping dread of a favourite horror movie could prevent him from nodding off.

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It was unclear how long he'd been sleeping when Jonathan opened his eyes and squinted at the TV screen. Poltergeist had been replaced by the goofy whimsy of Fast Times at Ridgemont High. A topless Phoebe Cates was approaching a spellbound Judge Reinhold, and in an instant at least one part of Byers' body was very much awake.

As the titillating scene ended, the VHS tape was paused and rewound for replay, a surreal turn that made Jonathan wonder if he wasn't having a bizarre, sexy dream. The volume on the set was muted, the only sound in the room a whisper of shallow breathing. Looking over at Steve, Byers observed that his host's gaze was fixed on the television, one hand resting on the remote while the other made subtle movements inside the front of his shorts.

Harrington, somehow sensing that he had an audience, withdrew his hand and tucked it behind his head, turning to Jonathan with a sly grin. "Hey, you're awake, huh? I was just thinking about you."

"Sure you were," Jonathan chuckled, glancing at the TV that now displayed Phoebe Cates' bare breasts in freeze-frame.

"I was thinking of both of you, actually," Steve reasoned, holding up his right hand. "This is Phoebe. And this," he said, taking Jonathan's hand and kissing his knuckle. "Is Jonathan."

Byers hated how much Harrington's smug flirting turned him on. "You're an idiot."

"Yes. And you're hot when you're jealous," Steve replied, pulling Jonathan close and kissing him softly.

Byers' hand was guided towards Harrington's crotch as the kiss

deepened. Taking the hint, Jonathan began to massage his lover through the thin fabric of his gym shorts. Steve moaned into his mouth, and soon Jonathan's hand roamed inside Harrington's Calvin Kleins, stroking him with enough fervour that Steve broke the kiss, gasping as he pressed his head back against the couch.

Jonathan kissed Steve's neck, gliding his tongue across the pulse point then sucking his earlobe, stopping to whisper, "And you're hot when you think I'm jealous."

This was enough to put Harrington over the edge, cursing under his breath as he released in Byers's hand. Jonathan withdrew, biting his lip to repress a satisfied grin. Steve stretched out on the sofa, resting his feet in Jonathan's lap. As Byers wiped himself off on a paper napkin, Harrington giggled, intoning in his best radio announcer voice: "Jonathan Byers, ladies and gentlemen. He cooks. He cleans. But does he do windows?"

Byers tickled Steve behind the knee, the resultant squirming only making the twitch in his crotch more pronounced. A soft beeping brought him back from any lustful intentions: the alarm on his wristwatch that he'd set to ensure he got home before his mom would worry. He stood up uncomfortably, trying to rearrange himself in his jeans. "I've got to go. Joyce gets anxious if either of us doesn't show up by 11."

Harrington looked disappointed but assured Jonathan with a wink that he would "rock his world" another time. Byers didn't doubt it for second.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

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## 11. Chapter 11

Steve shielded his eyes against the blinding spotlight as the gaudy, bejewelled crown was positioned on his head. Leaning towards the microphone, he intoned, “hey, watch the hair,” to an eruption of laughter and applause.

The night was almost exactly as he’d always envisioned it: being voted Prom King and sharing the stage with the girl of his dreams. He and Nancy weren’t together anymore, but one couldn’t blame the students of Hawkins High for ignoring her brief involvement with Billy. The new kid in town was becoming notorious for all the wrong reasons.

Miss Wheeler was at his side, radiant in a green off-the-shoulder dress, but squirming under the scrutiny of the crowd. “This is ridiculous,” she muttered through gritted teeth, smiling for the yearbook cameras.

“Yep,” Steve sighed, slipping an arm around her waist as the photographer instructed, eliciting lewd whoops from several members of the audience. He kept grinning despite his embarrassment, scanning the room for the only other person who might understand.

Jonathan sat at a large round table near the back: dark suit, white shirt, irresistible smirk. His hair looked slept on, calling to mind photos Steve had seen of River Phoenix’s reluctant red carpet appearances. Wisely avoiding the tripled-spiked punch, Byers set down his Pepsi and gave his friends an amused slow clap.

A first dance between the newly crowned pair was announced and Steve took Nancy’s hand as they descended from the stage to the synth-heavy opening strains of “Almost Paradise.” Harrington imagined that somewhere in the dark room Jonathan was rolling his eyes, perhaps even pretending to gag. It felt wrong to be thinking of Byers with Nancy in his arms, but Steve allowed himself a private smile. By way of distraction, the king pulled his queen close while the crowd cheered with delight. Almost paradise, indeed.

“God, this is so weird,” Nancy whispered.

“What’s so weird?” Unconvincing nonchalance.

“Oh, gee, I don’t know. Everyone watching us, like we’re this dream couple or something. And here we are, both thinking about someone else.”

“I thought you and what’s-his-face broke up.” Nerves had flicked Steve’s default behaviour to “asshole.”

“You know that’s not who I meant,” Nancy hissed, tightening her grip on his hand for effect. “I’m talking about Jonathan. I mean, you guys are kind of together, right?”

“Wow, you make it sound so serious.”

“It’s not serious?”

“I don’t know what it is,” Steve said, with a self-conscious glance at their spectators. He was pleased to note that other couples were now joining the dance, removing the pressure to perform. Relief dissolved when he caught sight of Nancy’s friend Natalie pulling Jonathan onto the floor. Harrington tried not to stare as the pretty senior took Byers’ hands in her own and placed them on her hips, smiling up at him until he laughed in spite of himself.

“She’s been talking about him all night,” Nancy remarked, following Steve’s gaze. “I told her that I thought he might be seeing someone.”

Watching Jonathan’s shy flirting gave Harrington an unexpected twinge of shame. He had no real claim to Byers, but some part of him had just assumed - selfishly - that Jonathan was his. Nancy placed a gentle finger under his chin and turned him to face her, reading his mind. “Steve, you have to tell him.”

The song ended and the awkward royal couple took a bow, Harrington struggling to remain subtle as he searched the crowd for Byers and his admirer. Perhaps they were sneaking off to be somewhere alone, some place private, some place where they could... “I have something for you,” Nancy said quietly, pressing a folded slip of paper into his hand. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and

with one last shy smile for the cameras, disappeared into the crowd.

Steve's teammates were calling his name but he moved away, muttering something about having to take a leak, and opening the note as he slipped from the dance floor. His heart thrummed in his chest when he read the simple message: "Back of the gym. Outside. - Jonathan."

\*\*\*\*\*

Stepping out into the warm night, Harrington undid the tie at his throat and patted the pockets of his tuxedo jacket, cursing himself for not bringing cigarettes. If Byers made him wait, it wouldn't do to be caught out here alone without some excuse. Steve leaned against the wall in the stark lamplight, anxiously eyeing the shadows.

From the darkness came a soft, mildly sarcastic voice, "Good evening, your highness."

The playful tone was uncharacteristic for Byers, and Steve froze, suspecting an adversary in the darkness. A cold sweat broke out across his brow and he carefully removed the absurd crown from his head, too afraid to speak.

Jonathan moved into the light. "Steve, it's me."

"You scared the shit of me!"

Frankie Goes to Hollywood began to throb from within the gym. "Relax," Byers chuckled, taking hold of the Steve's satin lapels and pulling him out of the glare before pushing him lightly against the wall.

"Take it easy, Byers. This isn't a rental," Harrington grumbled, still recovering from his panic.

"Don't be a snob." Warm lips brushed Steve's earlobe and eager fingers slid under his suspenders, pulling him close. Byers pressed his face into his lover's neck, breathing him in. "You smell amazing," he said with a little laugh.

"It's Drakkar Noir."

“Is that German or something?”

“It’s French, actually,” Harrington managed as Jonathan nuzzled his collar.

“Mmmm, French. Like this,” Byers whispered, conversation eclipsed by a lusty kiss.

Steve came up for air, caught off guard by Jonathan’s flirtatious demeanour, frustrated that the twilight obscured his features from interpretation. On impulse, he placed his twinkling crown on Byers’ head. “I wish you’d been on that stage with me tonight.”

Jonathan scoffed. “You and Nancy were the obvious choice. Besides, no matter what Lonnie says, I’m not really queen material.” Jonathan seemed agitated and giddy, like someone under the influence of a narcotic or some other newfound infatuation.

Natalie.

A spark of jealousy ignited in Harrington’s chest, but he refused to give himself away. “Natalie’s pretty cute.”

“Yeah.”

The gym doors burst open and Nancy stumbled out into the night, wiping tears on one arm, clumsily hoisting up her gown with the other.

Steve and Jonathan emerged from the shadows in unison and Nancy giggled through her sniffing. “What the hell are you two doing out... actually, never mind. Stupid question.”

“What happened?” Steve’s night was unraveling. Nancy’s presence was a welcome distraction from thoughts of Natalie with Byers.

“Billy is such a bastard,” Nancy said, dabbing at her eyes with the hem of her dress. “No surprise there, right? But for some reason I thought he’d lay off tonight.” There was a rip in the lace across one shoulder and she kept trying to tuck it under the elastic trim. “Who knew not being voted Prom King was such a big deal for anybody?”

“What did he do?” Jonathan’s face had hardened, fists shoved into his pockets.

“This,” she said softly, gesturing at the torn lace. “And he called me a bitch....Steve, it might be a good idea to make yourself scarce until Billy and his loser buddies leave for the quarry. Do you think you could give me a lift home?”

Harrington began to dig for his keys as Jonathan turned to go back inside. “I’ll catch you when you get back,” Byers explained. “I’m just going to make a phone call. You know, as a concerned citizen worried about some rowdy kids at the quarry. Anonymous, of course.” He raised a mischievous eyebrow then headed into the gym, still wearing Steve’s crown.

Harrington and Nancy drove in silence, consumed with their own thoughts. When the BMW pulled to a stop in front of the Wheeler residence, Nancy thanked him for the ride. She moved to get out of the car then reconsidered. “Steve, you should know that Natalie gave Jon her number tonight.”

Harrington cursed under his breath and gripped the steering wheel, refusing to meet Nancy’s eyes.

“And you should know that Jonathan told her he was already seeing someone, someone special.”



## 12. Chapter 12

Jonathan stood in the hallway outside the gym doors, his mind a curious muddle of relief and anxiety. Confessing to Natalie had felt good, even if revealing the identity of his “special someone” was out of the question. It was at once invigorating and terrifying to acknowledge, as much to himself as anyone, that Steve was more than a friend or a passing experiment.

Natalie’s attentions, while flattering, had had little effect on him. She was beautiful and yet Jonathan felt no desire to hold her, or to run his fingers through her hair. Charming though she was, it was unlikely that days or weeks from now he would find himself secretly blushing or smiling about something she had said.

Outside in the comforting darkness had been the perfect opportunity to come clean, to tell Steve what was on his mind. But instead Jonathan had panicked, shelving his best intentions in favour of awkward banter and sensual indulgence, his every action so peculiar that when Nancy interrupted the exchange, he was unsurprised to see a look of mild gratitude on Steve’s face.

The gym doors opened with a sudden echoing click, and a visibly tipsy couple were ejected by a red-faced Mr. Reilly. “Leave the school grounds immediately, or I will not hesitate to contact the authorities,” he growled with typical formality, releasing the boy’s collar with a slight shove and giving Jonathan a terse nod before returning to his chaperone duties within.

Tommy could barely stand without Carol’s high-heeled assistance, but that didn’t stop him from noticing Jonathan - and the crown he was still wearing - immediately. “Well, if it isn’t Yawnathan Byers - king of the freaks! Nice tiara, Jonny - did your boyfriend give it to you?” If Tommy’s presence were less threatening, Byers might have laughed out loud at such an apt inquiry, but fear pricked his skin and he kept his mouth shut.

To her credit, Carol stepped between the boys before the situation could escalate, her mascara smeared, a red punch stain visible down the front of her powder blue gown. Too exhausted to be amused by

her date's antics, she emitted a sound somewhere between a sigh and a groan and steered Tommy in the direction of the exit, casting Jonathan an exaggerated eye roll over her shoulder as she did so.

Loathe to draw further attention to himself, Byers removed the crown from his head and went into the gym. Sitting down at an unoccupied table, he idly turned the crown over in his hands. For a dime-store trinket, it possessed a kind of kitschy beauty with dozens of tiny rhinestones that glittered in the fractured beam from the mirror ball.

A slow song began to play and Jonathan watched with mild interest as couples took the floor and pulled each other close. Rouged cheeks settled against polyester shoulders, fresh-shaven chins leaned into up-do's, teased and glossed. Byers felt a twinge of envy observing the shameless ease of such public affection; his was a life of stolen moments behind closed doors and in parked cars, dependent on the blind or unassuming eyes of the world.

As the song's chorus swelled up, dancers sang into their partners' ears: "Hold my heart...Let loving start." Jonathan had tried to hate this song, corny as it was, but now the tune invariably called to mind a memory of watching MTV in the Harringtons' basement. Of Jonathan thinking that it would be safe to change the channel on "Hold Me Now" with Steve out of the room. Of Harrington suddenly flying down the stairs and launching himself one-handed over the back of the couch, collapsing across Byers' lap - all without spilling the popcorn cradled in his other arm. "You weren't planning on depriving us of this modern classic, were you, Jon?" Those gorgeous brown eyes gazing up at him and Jonathan opening his mouth to respond, only to have Steve stuff a handful of popcorn into his face, their laughter culminating in a series of delicious, buttery kisses...

"Jonathan, have you been getting into the punch?" A familiar voice. "The freaking Thompson Twins are playing and you're sitting here with a smile on your face." Natalie flounced down next to him in cloud of aquamarine tulle. "Hey, have you seen Nancy?" she asked. "She was fighting with that dirtbag Hargrove but then she kind of disappeared. Did you see her kick him in the nuts? I almost died! Can you believe that?"

"That sounds about right, actually," Jonathan murmured, pleased

with the mental picture of Billy getting a taste of his own medicine. Natalie was still looking at him expectantly. "Nancy left," he explained. "Steve drove her home."

"Oh, is that what they're calling it now?" Natalie giggled suggestively. "Looks like ladies' man Harrington was in such a rush to give Nancy a ride that the king forgot his crown!" Jonathan shook his head, smiling at her misinterpretation of events.

Natalie got up to leave, smoothing her dress. "Well, I'm glad to hear that Nancy's been taken care of. It's too bad that your special someone couldn't make it tonight," she added kindly. "Try to have fun, okay?" She pressed her lips together into something resembling a smile and then she was gone.

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Steve entered the gym looking every bit the King, tuxedo jacket thrown casually over his shoulder, a suave smirk on his face. Several people left the dance floor to welcome him, clapping him on the back and pushing a cup of punch into his free hand. Only Jonathan seemed to notice Steve's uncomfortable chuckling, the way he twisted his body away from the fawning touches, how his glance panned the room even as people talked directly into his ear.

It occurred to Jonathan that whatever his personal struggle, at least he was spared the constant pressure Harrington was under to prove his manhood: to amuse, to drink, to fight, to win. Steve met the societal expectations of what a young man ought to be - charming, sexually confident, athletic - but being the right kind of man was really no less isolating than being the wrong kind.

Harrington took a sip of punch, locking eyes with Byers in a glance that smouldered until each had to avert their gaze. It took all of Jonathan's willpower to resist jumping from his seat to push aside the pandering masses and kiss Steve full on the mouth. But he could only look on sadly as Steve worked the room, mingling, pretending.

A half hour later, Steve strode towards him, subtly brushing the nape of Jonathan's neck as he slipped by and out the gym doors.

For tonight, Steve's act was over. Jonathan took his cue to follow.

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They drove out to the Quarry Overlook and sat in their shirtsleeves on the hood of the BMW, saying little. Through the car's open windows, the dreamy synths of OMD drifted into their silence: "I can't imagine...my destination...my intention..." Laying back against the windshield, they took in the vastness of the sky, weighed down with not knowing where to begin. Jonathan felt Steve's strong fingers interlace with his own and gulped back an unexpected sob of relief.

Steve sighed. "Jesus, what are we doing?" Jonathan's heart sank, disappointment a knot in his throat. Was this how it ended?

Steve spoke again, his voice low and strained, "I mean, it's like I'm just going through the motions, you know? Like I'm just holding my breath until the next time I can be...until we can be...together."

Hating his words even as he spoke them, Jonathan murmured, "If it's too hard for you, we don't have to...I mean, we could stop. If you want."

"What do you want?"

"I want you."

Steve turned to him then, blinking back tears even as Jonathan leaned in to kiss his lips. The cover of night gave Byers a reckless charge and as the kiss deepened, he moved to straddle Harrington's hips, unconscious of their still-public surroundings. Steve put a playful hand on his chest, grinning at Jonathan's eagerness. "I think we need to take this conversation inside."

They climbed into the BMW's cramped backseat, reluctantly rolling up the windows against the hot night. Jonathan grumbled as he always did about the fast food containers and sports equipment covering the floor of the car. "My maid's on vacation," Steve shrugged, peeling off his suspenders and unbuttoning his shirt. They stretched out along the seat as best they could, hands and lips seeking any exposed flesh. Steve fumbled with the buttons on Jonathan's shirt

then gave up, undoing his belt instead.

Through the steamy back window, approaching headlights gave them both pause, and the screech of overloud music made their hearts stop. A car pulled behind them, the music continuing to blare; AC/DC, if Jonathan wasn't mistaken. "Stay here," Steve hissed, struggling back into his shirt and getting out of the car.

Jonathan did up his pants and groped around on the floor of the backseat until he laid hands on the smooth wooden object; this one had no spikes, but it would suit the purpose. Grateful for the obnoxious volume of "Hell's Bells," he opened the door and slipped noiselessly from the passenger side of the car.

Billy's back was to Jonathan as he approached. At first he couldn't make out what was being said, but as he got closer, Byers could hear that Hargrove's signature drawl was more slurred than usual.

Sober, Billy was an asshole; drunk, he was unhinged. "Steve, we've really got to stop meeting like this," he teased, taking a last pull from the bottle he was holding and smashing it against the BMW's front fender, giggling to himself all the while.

"You should go," Steve said, the slightest tremor in his voice. "I'm not alone."

"Don't worry, Prom King," Billy sneered, advancing on Steve with the neck of the broken bottle. "As soon as I'm finished with you, I'll be sure to give your darling Nancy a night to remember."

He grabbed Steve by the collar and put the sharp glass to his throat.

Disgust eradicated Jonathan's initial terror. Seizing his moment, he swung the baseball bat hard across the back of Billy's knees. "What the fuck?" Hargrove snarled, dropping to his hands and knees on the gravel. "Harrington, this prom queen of yours is really something," he muttered, about to turn in Jonathan's direction.

Steve caught him with a right hook to the jaw as Billy staggered to his feet. Jonathan tossed the bat to Steve, who snatched it from the air with predictable deftness without breaking eye contact with Billy.

“Two against one. I like that,” Hargrove snorted with a lewd smirk, pivoting to glance at his silent adversary. Steve refused to expose Jonathan, driving the butt-end of the bat into Billy’s gut with such force that he buckled forward with a grunt.

Steve stood considering Hargrove’s vulnerable position, grappling with his conscience; it would be so easy in this moment to deal a brutal blow to his tormentor. As Steve hesitated, Billy crumpled to the ground, more defeated by drink than violence.

“I think he’s out,” Steve announced quietly. “Here, take this.” Handing Jonathan the bat, Harrington nudged Billy’s leg with the toe of his shoe. Finding Hargrove unresponsive, Steve lifted his unconscious form by the armpits and started to drag him back towards the Chevy.

Jonathan stared after him. “Are you crazy? What are you doing?”

“Well, would you rather we just left him here to sleep it off by the side of the road?”

“No, but...I mean, what if he wakes up?”

“Then I suppose you’re up to bat, Jonny,” Steve replied with a wry smirk.

Jonathan turned off the Camaro’s ignition while Steve heaved Billy into the backseat. Hargrove stirred as Jonathan was closing the driver’s side door, looking into Byers’ face with bleary eyes and mumbling, “wait, wait, wait...no, no, wait...Jonathan Byers? Ha! Really? You’ve got to be kidding me...” chuckling before passing out again, a nasty smile playing on his lips.

## 13. Chapter 13

Morning arrived with a crack of thunder and an elbow to the ribs. Steve mumbled irritably and tried to roll over but half of his body was restrained. With Billy's sinister smile still hovering at the edges of his subconscious, Steve was seized with a sudden panic, thrashing in his sleep until he was shocked awake by the rumble of driving rain.

His eyes flew open, coming to focus on Jonathan's confused face. In an instant, reality flooded back: the memory of leaving Billy in his car, driving to Byers' house, staying up to watch the late movie with Will and El, collapsing into Jonathan's bed at the end of the night.

Byers shifted his body so that Steve was no longer trapped underneath him, rubbing tired eyes and mustering a look of concern. "Are you all right? Were you dreaming?"

Steve propped his head up on one elbow and reached over with his free hand to tuck a strand of hair behind Jonathan's ear. "No, I wasn't dreaming. But I think I might be, now."

Byers scoffed, falling back on his pillow. "Jesus, that was corny."

"Yeah, but it's also true," Steve said softly, leaning in to plant a soft kiss on Jonathan's bare shoulder. "There was so much that I wanted to tell you last night, but things got so messed up..."

Thunder continued to mutter outside. Steve knew that Jonathan felt self-conscious about intimacy in his mother's house, but doubted if even Byers could resist the sexy allure of a storm. Drawing back the sheets to expose Jonathan's torso, he murmured, "Mmm, Jon, what aren't you wearing?" and slipping his hand under the covers, his fingers quickly found the knotted drawstring of Jonathan's pajama bottoms; with a tug it came loose.

Byers took Steve's wandering hand into his own with an earnest look. "What did you want to tell me?"

"Hmm?"

“Last night.”

Abandoning his carnal pursuit with some reluctance, Steve rolled onto his back, and gazed at the ceiling with a sigh. “Just that this whole thing hasn’t really gone like I’d expected it to. Like, I knew that I wasn’t just into girls, but the way you looked at me that first night was...like, wow, you know?” He wasn’t making sense but he soldiered on. “I thought that it would be fun to fool around with you, but I didn’t think it would go this far.”

Harrington could sense by Jonathan’s tense silence that this little speech wasn’t coming across quite like he was hoping. Propping himself back up, he glanced briefly at Jonathan’s stricken expression then began to stroke his arm absently, focussing his gaze on the soft blond hair above Jon’s slender wrist. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that...hoo boy, here goes...Jon, I think I’m falling for you.”

Byers exhaled a long breath, his face breaking into a wide grin. “Me, too.”

Steve chuckled and admired Byers’ long hands, still unable to make eye contact. “Well, Jon, if you’ve fallen for yourself, I don’t see what you need me for...”

“You know that’s not what I meant, asshole,” Jonathan muttered with a smirk, shoving Steve’s shoulder hard enough that he nearly fell off the bed, but Harrington recovered quickly, catching Jonathan in a playful tackle and straddling his lap in mock triumph. Jon’s smug expression changed, his eyes roaming hungrily over Steve’s body, clad in just his white underthings.

Taking advantage of Jonathan’s now apparent arousal, Steve planted his hands above Jonathan’s shoulders and moved in for a kiss, but Jonathan put up a hand in protest, mumbling something about needing to brush his teeth first.

“I could kiss you somewhere else,” Steve offered smoothly. “Just tell me where you want it.” He licked his lips, pausing with his tongue in the corner of his mouth, a gesture that brought an unexpected look of dread to Byers’ face. Steve was about to ask what he’d done wrong when the clock radio suddenly clicked and began to blare Cyndi



Lauper. Steve groaned. "Byers, why would you set an alarm on a Saturday?"

"I didn't," Jonathan explained, pushing himself up onto his elbows. "It's El. This is her way of telling us that she's made breakfast - and that she expects us at the table in five minutes." Noting Steve's skeptical expression, Byers elaborated with a chuckle, "just be glad that she didn't seek us out in that mind palace of hers...your ass in those briefs would have given her a real eyeful..."

"You got a problem with my ass, Byers?"

"That's not what I said."

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Steve's heart was still thrumming from Jonathan's goodbye kiss as he turned onto his street, but his stomach clenched when his house came into view: his father was in the driveway, loading golf clubs into the trunk of the Seville. For a moment, Steve wondered if he could elude notice by parking a block or two away and waiting until the Cadillac disappeared in the direction of the country club, but it was already too late. His father was staring down the street at the BMW, waiting in his authoritative stance, feet planted, hands on hips.

Steve parked next to the Cadillac, unnerved by the smile his father was giving him through the windshield. Climbing out of the car, he looked up at the grey sky and remarked on the pleasant change in the weather; his father cut him off short. "Where did you sleep last night? Your mother was worried sick." Something like amusement flickered in his father's eyes, putting Steve on his guard.

"I drove Nancy home," he said, returning his father's steady gaze.

"You didn't answer my question. Any chance you were out at the Quarry?"

Sweat prickled his palms, but he wouldn't give himself away. "No, sir."

His father's gaze hardened with suspicion then relaxed with a put-on chuckle. "Well, I'm glad to hear it." A firm, threatening pat on the

back. "I heard the cops busted up some party down there last night - not the kind of people I want you mixing with." He opened the door of the Seville and got in. "Just keep our name out of papers, son. You'd better get in the house and let your mother know you're home. She's hysterical."

His father pulled away and Steve went inside, feeling a rush of relief at the sight of his mother quietly reading and sipping coffee at the kitchen counter. She was neither worried nor hysterical over Steve's absence; it was simply in keeping with her husband's character to project his own anxieties onto others. She asked no questions, only looking up from her magazine long enough to remark, "I'm just glad you had a nice time, honey. Prom night is so magical and romantic, you know?"

## 14. Chapter 14

As the school year wound down, Jonathan nursed a lingering fear of Billy, replaying their prom night confrontation over in his head, and speculating about what Hargrove did or didn't remember.

Jonathan had refrained from telling Steve that Billy had seen him that night, deciding that Harrington was already consumed with anxiety over his post-graduation future; inciting unnecessary panic would only make matters worse.

Jonathan occupied his troubled mind with exam preparation; his finals complete, he further distracted himself with a new part-time job, pumping gas at Robinson's Service Station between shifts at the lumberyard. He found that he liked to lose himself in the task-driven nature of the work, grateful that it required no heavy lifting and demanded very little small talk.

Byers was filling out his first timesheet when the service bell sounded in the garage. Mr. Robinson gestured from beneath a broken-down Buick that Jonathan should make time for one last customer.

He took up an oil check rag from the desk and wandered outside where the sight of a familiar blue Camaro gleaming in the sunlight formed an immediate knot in the pit of Jonathan's stomach.

"Byers," Billy drawled, casting a sly glance in Jonathan's direction. "It's been....awhile."

Jonathan kept his distance, twisting the greasy rag in his hands, his jaw set against the betrayal of emotion.

"Not really the service with the smile type, huh?" Hargrove chuckled, pouting with mock disappointment. "Look, just fill it up with regular."

Jonathan moved to the pump and went to work. Catching Mr. Robinson's watchful eye from the window of the shop, he left the pump and took the squeegee from its bucket. He washed the Camaro's windshield, struggling to ignore Hargrove's leering gaze

through the glass.

The pump clicked and Jonathan sighed with relief that this uncomfortable episode was coming to a close. He replaced the nozzle and approached the driver's side for payment, where Billy was gazing up at him over mirrored shades, a neatly folded bill between two fingers. Byers wordlessly reached for the money but Hargrove pulled back, refusing to let him off easy.

"You know, I always kind of figured Harrington for a faggot," he mused, holding Jonathan's gaze for effect. "It's the slumming that surprises me."

Jonathan's face burned but he took the money, his throat constricted with words that wouldn't come.

"That's what I thought you'd say." Hargrove's smile was cruel. "Keep the change, huh?" And with a wink, he started up his engine.

Jonathan, impotent with rage, stood clenching and unclenching his fists, blinking back tears as the Camaro peeled out of the station and onto the highway.

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He sat in his car for more than fifteen minutes, trying to work up the nerve to knock on Steve's door. Maybe he shouldn't have come.

He cursed under his breath, yanking the key out of the ignition and getting out of the car. As he approached the house, the rollicking beat of "What I Like About You" blasted from the backyard and he headed for the side gate.

Steve was cleaning the pool, singing into the long handle of a sifting net, and bouncing to the music in his gym shorts and a baby blue crop top - an item that Jonathan was still trying to hate.

Harrington's good mood only made Jonathan more miserable. Maybe he shouldn't have come.

Steve's face broke into a wide grin when he saw Jonathan shuffling into the backyard. "Hey, I was just going to call you! I've got the

place to myself for the night..." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively then frowned. "What's wrong?"

Jonathan, suddenly weary, collapsed into a cushioned lawn chair with a sigh, willing his lip to stop trembling. "I don't think we should see each other any more."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Steve pushed the cleaning net aside carelessly, leaving it to drift in the pool. The radio was intrusive now and he clicked it off, facing Jonathan with a hurt expression. "What did I do?"

Of course Steve would blame himself, Jonathan thought. "It's not you," he said, clasping his hands together tightly to keep him from crying. "It's not you." He shouldn't have come.

"Jon, you're freaking me out."

Byers managed a stammered explanation, beginning with prom night, through his month of agonized worry, culminating with the nasty encounter with Billy at the station. Angry tears fell as he repeated Hargrove's hateful words, and he wiped his eyes quickly before meeting Steve's gaze.

"Christ, Jon. I wish you'd told me sooner. I think I could have handled it." Grim but pragmatic, Steve sat down and pulled open a small cooler, taking out a beer and offering one to Jonathan, who waved him off.

"Billy already has it in for you. I don't want to make things worse for you, so maybe it's best if..."

"If we just let that piece of shit wreck the only thing that makes sense right now? Fuck that." Steve's eyes flashed then he chuckled at his own melodrama. Reaching under his chair, he produced a pack of cigarettes, lit up and took a drag, leaning back in his seat. "Slumming? Did Hargrove really say that? Sounds jealous to me."

Jonathan watched Steve go through the motions of his tough guy act, reluctant to prod at the hurt just beneath the surface. "You don't think this is serious? I mean, if he told your dad..."

“Trash like Hargrove isn’t even a blip on my old man’s radar - it wouldn’t matter what Billy had to tell him.”

“Trash like Hargrove? Okay, Dallas, enough Outsiders for you,” Jonathan grinned.

“It’s an excellent film.”

“Full of strong male leads and beautiful....performances, right?”

“Mmm, Jon. Don’t even get me started... And please don’t stop calling me Dallas.” Steve smiled and finished off his beer, the dour mood vanquished. “So what do you say? - I could grill up some burgers and we can hang out or whatever?”

The possibility of ‘whatever’ wore the final edge off of Jonathan’s tension. “Just let me give my mom a call to let her know I’ll be late.”

“Awesome! Hey, come inside - I want to show you something that I’ve been working on.”

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Steve Harrington was a lot of things but a hobbyist was not one of them. He didn’t collect anything (unless you counted pastel polos, which Jonathan didn’t), and he wasn’t much of a tinkerer either; such activities demanded a level of concentration and tenacity that Steve simply didn’t possess. The idea of Harrington “working on” something was baffling.

Jonathan allowed himself to be led by the hand through the house and upstairs to Steve’s room; this was unexpected. He had only been in this room once before, to help Steve hook up the new speakers he’d received for graduation. The basement was their domain, an arrangement that Harrington probably figured would raise fewer eyebrows with his family.

Once in the room, Steve kicked the door closed, catching Jonathan off guard with a sudden, forceful kiss. He tugged Jonathan’s work uniform from his jeans, fumbled briefly with the buttons at his collarbone then pulled the shirt over Jonathan’s head. “You don’t need to work on this,” Byers gasped. “You’re already good at this.”

“Take off your shoes.”

Jonathan shook his head, bewildered, but sat down on the bed and did as he was told; Steve had a hot, wild look in his eye that made him self conscious. Jonathan laughed nervously as Harrington pushed him back on the bed and began to undo his jeans. They had fooled around a lot, over and around their clothes, but Byers wasn't sure that he was ready to be this exposed. “Steve, I - “

“You're right - we need music,” Steve said, jumping up and heading to the stereo. He pressed play on the cassette deck, catching the Psychedelic Furs mid-song. Harrington approached the bed, singing along with exaggerated sultriness -

There's emptiness behind their eyes  
There's dust in all their hearts  
They just want to steal us all  
And take us all apart

Jonathan rolled his eyes. “This song is just so...”

“Perfect. It's perfect, Jon. And so are you.” Steve hooked his thumbs in Jonathan's belt loops, pulling his jeans down and off.

“What have you been working on, exactly?” Jonathan laughed, feeling shy and gazing at the ceiling as Steve trailed kisses down his bare chest.

“Just something I've been wanting to do...I wasn't sure I would know what I was doing, so I did some...studying.” Steve's mouth was on Jon's belly and moving south. Jonathan closed his eyes, holding his breath as Steve removed his underwear.

The sensation that followed was not unlike losing time, a sort of exquisite delirium. He relinquished himself to the music, to his lover's gentle rhythm and before long, his hands were in Steve's hair, a long moan escaping his throat.

Byers opened his eyes. Steve was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, grinning up at him. “Was that okay?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Jonathan was still trying to catch his

breath. "That might be the best thing that has ever happened to me." He was only half joking.

Steve lay down next to Jonathan and kissed him softly. Byers shivered with the unexpected pleasure of tasting himself on Steve's tongue. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure - but nothing too personal - we hardly know each other," Steve quipped, with a glance at Jonathan's nakedness.

Byers punched Steve playfully in the shoulder and covered himself with the rumpled sheet of the unmade bed. "Maybe I don't want to know how you've been...preparing for this."

"My mom has some books that she doesn't think that I know about," came the mischievous reply. "Oh, and I watched some videos..."

"Ah yes, pornography, that great instructional tool," Jonathan snickered.

"Are you complaining, Byers?"

"No." Jonathan propped himself up on one elbow, almost serious. "Can I...do you want me to work on it too?"

"Yes, please. For science." Steve held a straight face for as long as possible then gave up.

Jonathan ran his finger under the waistband of Steve's shorts. "This is still so much newer to me than it is to you."

Steve tried to give Jonathan an earnest look, but a smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Lucky for you, Byers, this is one time when you actually want to blow it."

Jonathan laughed. Steve couldn't be more right.



## 15. Chapter 15

John Fogerty's "Centerfield" roared from the speakers of Hawkins Stadium. Steve glanced into the stands as he approached the plate. Nancy whooped at him through her hands, enthusiastically clapping as he took a few practice swings.

But no Jonathan. Again.

Steve had tried to be understanding about Jonathan's need to work full-time during the summer, but the frequent absences still hurt. He shoved the disappointment into a corner of his brain where he'd been keeping everything that he was resolving not to think about.

Like the unopened, too-thin envelopes received from the colleges he'd applied to.

Or the smug look Billy had given him from the lifeguard tower that forced him to reconsider a job at the pool.

Disheartened as he felt, Steve was playing a good game. He had already scored a game-tying home run and two RBIs. Now, he continued to channel his misery into deliberate physical drive, giving himself one last ineffectual neck stretch and wiping the sweat from his upper lip with the back of his batting glove. Focus, Harrington, focus.

Down by two runs, the opposing team had brought in a relief pitcher and with one brief glance at the mound, Steve sensed trouble. The handsome black reliever's calm gaze was uncomfortably intimate. He wound up for his first pitch with a smirk, and gave Steve a quick, suggestive wink before drilling a fastball right across the plate.

Steve's face felt hot as his bat made contact, firing the ball up and back where it landed softly in the catcher's mitt for an easy out.

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While loading gear into his trunk, Steve heard the crunch of

approaching footsteps on gravel.

The relief pitcher had changed out of his uniform into fitted acid wash jeans, white hightops and a faded yellow T-shirt that accentuated his lean frame. He was even better good looking up close, taller than Steve by about two inches, with an easy smile that reached his warm brown eyes. "Harrington?" he asked, extending his hand.

"Uh, yeah, Steve, actually."

The handshake, firm and confident, gave Steve an electric shiver all the way to his Nikes. "I'm Josh," the pitcher offered, withdrawing his hand with a soft chuckle. "You play a good game."

Wiping sweaty palms on the front of his uniform, Steve began a nervous ramble. "Yeah, I really thought we had you guys up until that last inning. That starter of yours was in real trouble, you know what I mean? But then they brought you in and - wow - you were so...you were really something."

Steve felt short of breath, his restless gaze traveling over Josh's clean-shaven jawline, the muscles of his forearms, those strong hands. "That is, I mean, your fastball is pretty impressive... but you probably hear that all the time...Look, I've got to get going - Josh, is it? Take it easy, man." He nearly stumbled to the door of his car, cursing under his breath.

Josh piped up, "Say, Harrington - sorry - Steve? Could you give me a lift? My uncle's having a barbecue and the game ran a bit late."

"Sure, why not?" Steve muttered, settling into the driver's seat before Josh could catch the uneasy look on his face.

He started the car, "When Doves Cry" blaring at top volume. Steve moved to turn it down but Josh put out a hand to stop him. "Nah, nah, nah. My man Prince needs to be played loud, otherwise it hurts my feelings," he grinned. "My uncle's place is on Washington."

Steve couldn't think of a thing to say, so he just drove in silence, trying to breathe in the musky scent of his passenger's cologne

without seeming obvious. Josh hummed along with the music, sometimes chiming in on the falsetto bits. "Say, this is a nice ride, man. Leather seats! How'd you get a car like this? You must be some kind of rich boy." His tone was teasing, but the words stung.

"Just lucky, I guess," Steve shrugged, trying to keep good humour. "You like cars, huh?"

Josh considered this. "I like you, actually."

Steve ran a hand through his hair, and let out a long, slow breath, pretending to fixate on driving as he pulled up to a stop sign. Josh's bold words hung in the air, and Steve could feel the weight of his passenger's gaze as he awaited a response.

"You don't..." Steve cleared his throat, refusing to take his eyes off the road. "You don't even know me."

"Fair enough," Josh said, smoothly. "But I know a bit. I know that you love to play ball, and that you know good music. You appreciate a fine automobile. And - most importantly - I know that the first time you looked at me...that you liked what you saw."

Steve attempted a laugh that was more of a wheeze dissolving into a coughing fit. "That's quite an ego you've got there, Columbo," he managed. "You've really got me all figured out, eh?"

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, man," Josh remarked, reaching over and giving Steve's thigh a squeeze for emphasis. "I just know these things, that's all. I'm just checking in, in case you were interested."

Josh took his hand away, and Steve was startled by how much he already missed that brief touch. This awareness of his loneliness surprised him and he realized suddenly that he'd been consumed with being fair to Jonathan, afraid of seeming like some needy, spoiled rich kid. He couldn't blame Jon - and he didn't - but if he was honest, he felt neglected.

And here was Josh. Wanting him and saying so. Making it so easy on him to just take what he wanted without guilt or shame dragging on his conscience...

“This is my uncle’s place right here.” Josh pointed out a strangely familiar blue and white split level on the right, its long driveway packed with cars. Marvin Gaye crooned from the backyard.

Steve parked along the curb, dejected. Josh went to open the door then thought better of it, searching in the gym bag at his feet for some unknown object, at last producing a baseball and a pen. “For my #1 fan,” he giggled, scribbling on the ball. He got out, closed the door and tossed the ball gently through the open car window with one last smile. “Thanks for the ride, Steve. You sure play a good game.”

Steve was still sitting in his car pondering a phone number scrawled on a baseball when another vehicle pulled up to the curb ahead of him. A Ford LTD with a bad muffler.

Will Byers jumped out of his brother’s car and called to Lucas Sinclair who greeted him from the front porch. Josh’s cousin, Lucas.

Shit.

## 16. Chapter 16

Jonathan was quietly enjoying Will's animated description of a new arcade game, but his heart sank when he spotted Steve's BMW.

They hadn't seen each other in more than two weeks. Steve said that it was no big deal but several awkward phone conversations told a different story.

Steve's passenger got out of the car. The young black man's confident body language made Jonathan conscious of his own slouch and he straightened up a bit behind the wheel.

"Jon, you're staring," Will remarked, a curious smile in his voice. "That's Lucas's cousin Josh - from Indianapolis. Lucas totally worships this dude! Apparently he's the best pitcher in the state, with a scholarship and everything. Lucas says all the scouts are after him, whatever that means."

Not just the scouts, I'll bet, Jonathan thought, noting the flirty smile on Josh's face as he tossed a baseball into the open window of the BMW.

A fellow ball player. Just a friend. And yet.

This handsome friend was catching a ride from yet another ball game that Jonathan had missed. He willed a sour knot to stop forming in his stomach.

"I didn't know he and Steve knew each other, but that's pretty cool," Will said, not picking up on his brother's discomfort. "You don't have to pull into the driveway. I'll just get out here. See ya at 8?"

"Yeah, for sure," Jonathan murmured, parking the car by the curb ahead of the BMW. Will's eyes were on him, and he cleared his throat to regain some composure. "Did Mom say that 8 was fine?"

"Yeah... Hey Jon, is everything alright? You're acting kind of weird."

"What? Yeah, of course. Have a good time," Jonathan replied with a weak smile. Will hopped out of the car and Lucas came from the

backyard to greet his friend. Jonathan was soon forgotten.

Shaking off his nerves and an unexpected twinge of jealousy, Jonathan got out and approached Steve's car. Steve sat gazing through the windshield, both hands resting on the steering wheel. He looked a bit shellshocked, but didn't seem upset, for which Jonathan was grateful.

"Hey."

Steve made no reply.

"Good game?"

Steve sneered and let out a long breath, his hands gripping and ungripping the wheel. "We lost," he said with a miserable chuckle. "Like you care."

"I do care, it's just -" Jonathan stammered. "You know how things are...and it's not fair to you but it's not fair to me either and...Steve, look at me."

Steve's gaze remained focussed on a distant point up the street. "I can't compete."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Steve turned to meet Jonathan's eyes, the slightest tremor in his chin. "I can't compete with what you need to do...I mean, I'm an asshole if I say you work too much, right? And I'm a liar if I say it doesn't matter... so I guess I'm just some needy loser, right? Right? Say it!" he hissed, anger an antidote to his encroaching tears.

"You're not a...no. No, it's not like that. It's..." Jonathan sputtered, desperate to salvage the conversation, but unprepared for Steve's show of emotion. "Look, can we talk about this somewhere less... public?" Will and Lucas were chatting with Josh on the front porch. Jonathan noticed the older boy stealing glances in their direction.

Steve sighed, the fight gone. "Sure. Fine. But not now, I've got to get to the mall and grab something to eat before...work." He said this last word so quietly that Jonathan could hardly hear him.

"I'm sorry, did you just say what I think you said?" Jonathan was smiling in spite of himself.

"Yeah. I got so bored waiting around for you to take some time off that I went out and got a job!" Jonathan sensed hurt beneath the sarcasm. "Don't worry, Jon, the irony isn't lost on me."

Jonathan was still processing this new information, but saw an opportunity to redeem himself. "Look, where are you working? I can meet you afterwards if you want to hang out and talk or something."

Steve gazed into the distance again, chewing on his thumbnail for a moment. When he turned back to meet Jonathan's eye, his demeanour was serious. "Okay. But you have to promise not to laugh."

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Starcourt Mall had been open for several months, and Jonathan had made a point of avoiding it. Joyce spent a considerable amount of time around the Byers' dinner table deriding the mall, insisting that it undermined the small businesses of Hawkins with its "spiffy" new clothing and sporting goods stores and "fancy pants" TV advertising. These were harsh words for Joyce. As a show of solidarity with his mother - and because he was too broke to shop at Starcourt anyway - Jonathan had steered clear.

Until now.

He sat in his car, anxiously pressing the fast forward button on the cassette deck hoping to quell his panic with the perfect song. After four skips, he settled on The Smiths, but Morrissey's mournful lament just made him feel more dejected.

He'd finally screwed everything up and now Steve wanted to end it. He'd been an idiot to think it could last.

He closed his eyes and took some deep breaths as the song ended. Please please please let me get what I want. Lord knows, it would be the first time. He ripped the key out of the ignition and jerked open the car door before he had time to reconsider.

Moments later, he was striding through the food court, ignoring the expectant looks of the various counter clerks and walking directly into Scoops Ahoy Ice Cream Parlor. The place was empty except for one couple sharing a banana split at a table in the corner.

Incredibly, a Suzanne Vega B-side was playing from a hidden speaker, and if Jonathan wasn't mistaken, Robin from calculus was standing behind the counter dressed as the world's crankiest sailor.

"Hey, Jonathan," she drawled, her elbows on the counter, her chin in her hands. "You look lost. What brings you to this doomed isle?"

Jonathan couldn't help smiling. He'd always liked Robin, her sense of humour in particular. "I didn't know you worked here."

"It's just a summer fling, I'm not committing," she quipped, rolling her eyes. "Can I get you something?"

"Um, not really." Jonathan blushed. The five dollars in his pocket had to last until his next paycheck.

Robin shrugged. "Suit yourself. We close in five." She said this last bit loud enough for the banana split couple to hear then took a broom out to the dining area and began to aggressively sweep next to their table.

Steve wandered into the front of the shop from the backroom, stopping dead when he saw Jonathan. His uniform matched Robin's, the sailor cap askew on his perfectly coiffed head. It was adorable. And hilarious. Jonathan turned away to hide his smile.

Steve leaned against the counter, whistling low to get Jonathan's attention without Robin noticing. "Ahoy, matey," he muttered under his breath. "Did you want anything before I shut off the sundae machine?"

"I want to apologize," Jonathan whispered, still not meeting Steve's eyes.

"I'm not sure if we have that flavour," Steve replied, his tone coy but bitter. "Would you settle for Butterscotch Dream?"



"I don't want to settle," Jonathan growled, surprising himself then clearing his throat and giving Steve a serious look. "I fucked up and I'm sorry and I want to fix...this."

"Well, there's no fixing this," Steve remarked, gesturing at the shop's tacky decor. "My marks weren't even good enough for the community college," he said, angry and sad at once. "This is my goddamn destiny, Jon. So I'm obviously not good enough for you either."

Robin had succeeded in shaking the final customers loose and was clamping the gate shut on the shop with an exaggerated flourish. "Hey Harrington - you mop, I'll do the math and let's get the hell out of here. I have a date with The Facts of Life tonight and I'd hate to make those ladies wait."

"She's a bit weird, but she's never boring," Steve sighed, rolling a mop bucket out from behind a cabinet while Robin started to count the register.

"I didn't know you'd gotten turned down," Jonathan said softly. "You could have told me."

Steve mopped the floor behind the counter in silence, making his way around the shop and flipping chairs up onto the tables with one hand while maneuvering the mop with the other. Jonathan definitely preferred being sniped to being ignored.

Steve parked the mop and ripped the sailor hat from his head, stuffing it into the pocket of his shorts. "'Night, Robin," he called, walking towards the back of shop. Jonathan could hear a door open and swing shut with a click.

"I don't know what's up with him, but he's been miserable all night," Robin said, opening the cash register and pulling out a wad of bills. "I mean, like, really bad. Like wasn't-even-flirting-with-the-hottest-girls bad. And they were throwing themselves at him, because of course they were..."

She turned her attention to counting the fives. Jonathan shifted awkwardly on his feet. "I should probably get going," he said with a

glance at the locked gate.

Robin sighed and restarted her count. "What's the deal with you and dingus anyway?" she muttered, looking up from the bills. Jonathan felt his face getting hot again, his voice stuck in his throat.

Robin scrutinized him for a moment, then let out a yelp, smacking her hand down on the counter. "Wait - you're shitting me!" she exclaimed, a huge grin on her face. "You're dealing dope, aren't you, Jonathan? You're King Steve's dealer! Holy shit - I don't believe it!" She sounded so impressed that Jonathan allowed himself a mischievous smirk, giving nothing away.

"Well, typically we don't allow soliciting on the premises," Robin said, with the phony authority of a TV cop. "But, you're a good kid, Byers, so tonight, I'll make an exception." She nodded towards the back of the ice cream parlour and Jonathan quickly made his way to the rear exit.

## 17. Chapter 17

The sun was setting and the mall had closed for the night but a few bored townies still lingered in the parking lot. Steve kept a brisk pace as he walked to his car, his eyes glued to the pavement, wishing he could disappear.

The Scoops' uniform made invisibility impossible.

"Ahoy, sailor!" a voice called and someone else laughed - perhaps the same person who tossed an empty beer can in Steve's direction, missing his head by a few feet. Steve kept moving without glancing up.

"Keep it together, Harrington," he murmured, pushing his hair out of his eyes and picking up speed. "No time for a nervous breakdown now."

Across the parking lot, a car radio blared the Doors - the one about getting up in the morning and getting yourself a beer. It occurred to Steve how much Jonathan hated the Doors, how he despised this lyric in particular because it was the one Lonnie would sing after a nasty bender.

Reaching his car, Steve patted the pockets of his uniform, cursing with the sudden realization that he'd left his keys in the Scoops' break room. Wanting to scream at his own stupidity, he slammed the door and stalked back across the parking lot.

A loud whistle froze him in his tracks as a blue Camaro pulled to a stop, blocking his path. Jim Morrison howled from the car's speakers.

"Quite the look for you, Harrington," Billy smirked, turning down the music and leaning out of the open window.

"It sure is," Steve muttered. Sweat prickled on his forehead, despair and panic flicking to rage. "Why don't you take it all in and then fuck off?" He felt unfit for a fight yet resolved to make a stand, however pathetic.

Billy chuckled. "Jesus, Harrington. You look like shit." He lit a cigarette and took a slow drag, holding Steve's gaze, relishing the look of anguish on his face. "I'll bet Byers doesn't mind though, huh?" he grinned. "I mean...beggars can't be choosers, right?"

Steve almost took the bait. Almost. It would feel so good to grab Hargrove by the throat. Or to smash his face against the steering wheel of his obnoxious car.

But not here, not now. The day had been long enough already.

Steve scoffed, rolling his eyes and trying for indifference that he didn't feel. "I don't have to listen to this."

He moved to walk around the rear of the Camaro but Billy was already out of the car, grabbing his arm and twisting it sharply behind his back. Pain shot through his shoulder as Hargrove continued to twist, pinning him to the rear of the car.

Steve winced, his face pressed against the sun-hot metal of the Camaro's trunk. He tasted blood on his lips and knew tears weren't far behind. "I don't get you, man," he managed. "I mean, what do you even want?"

Billy's breath was at his ear. "I want to hear you admit it."

Steve felt sick. Everything was too much: his failures, his secrets, his heartache, the unending pain of Hargrove's hands on him, still twisting. He was losing focus, his shoulder catching fire. He just wanted it all to stop. He wanted...

"Fine, I'll admit whatever you...just..."

On the brink of confession, there came a shout.

Jonathan. His words angry but incomprehensible. A rush of relief as Billy was grabbed and pulled away.

Steve collapsed against the Camaro, something bursting behind his eyes as he struggled to regain his mental clarity. He could hear the thud and grunt of blows being exchanged.

He turned to see Jonathan shoved to the ground, Billy's knee pressed into his back, the lit cigarette just inches from his terrified face. Byers wasn't fighting - he wasn't even moving, his tearful eyes fixated on the burning ember.

Billy growled into his ear, determined to shake some fight into him, but Jonathan remained paralyzed, barely registering Billy's cruel speech. "You dirtbag...such a faggot...what's it like to..."

Enraged, Steve shouted and charged at Billy's back.

His momentum was short-lived.

Robin came screaming from the mall entrance, armed with a small black case. Billy glanced up in confusion as she lunged and Steve watched in shock as Robin brought the case down hard across the back of Billy's head. He pitched forward, unconscious, and Jonathan had to push him aside to avoid getting caught under his weight.

Byers stood up slowly, wiping his eyes with the heel of his hands. He cursed softly to himself, but didn't meet Steve's startled gaze.

A mall security guard was approaching, talking into his radio, waving the teens off. It was clear that he hadn't witnessed the violence - only Billy's condition - and that he judged Steve, Robin and Jonathan to be little more than nosy bystanders.

"Are you guys okay?" Robin asked quietly, moving away from the guard. She shot a look back at Billy, still lying prone by the curb. "Shit...is he okay?"

"Not as a general rule," Steve said drily, trying to catch Jonathan's eye; his gaze didn't leave the pavement.

"Your keys, dingus," Robin said, handing them over with an awkward smile. Shaken, but trying to hide behind a cheerful demeanour. "I mean, Saturday night's alright for fighting, but I'm out of here, you know? It's been a slice."

She turned to go, flashing a peace sign with one hand, waving the mysterious black case in the other. Noting Steve's confusion, she shrugged. "It's a flute case, gentlemen! And no, I don't leave home

without it!” She disappeared around the corner.

“Hey, let’s go,” Steve said, softly touching Jonathan’s arm. Byers stiffened but didn’t pull away. He didn’t speak, only followed Steve to his car.

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They drove in silence through town, a hot August breeze moving through the car’s open windows. The local radio station played quietly; “Broken Wings” and “Take My Breath Away” -the kind of soppy ballads that made Jonathan’s stomach turn.

But he hadn’t moved to change the station once. Something was very wrong.

With no destination in mind, Steve kept driving, making random turns, stealing occasional glances in Jonathan’s direction. Soon they were on the main road and headed beyond Hawkins town limits.

Steve sighed and cleared his throat. “Weird night, huh? Maybe you just want to go home? I could drop you off at your car or...”

“No.”

“Look, are you pissed at me or something - ?”

“Lonnie used to do that.” Jonathan sounded strange, like he was talking both to himself and to no one in particular.

“I’m sorry, Jon, I’m not following. Do you want -“

“He’d hold me down and threaten me. Call me names. All of it.”

A sinking feeling settled in Steve’s chest as he absorbed the weight of Jonathan’s words. He wanted to cry, or maybe punch something. Instead, he pulled onto a dark sideroad and put the car in park.

“Hargrove put you back there again,” he said softly.

Jonathan nodded, still staring straight ahead as tears spilled down his cheeks. “I really wanted to fight him, but I couldn’t...I just couldn’t.”

Steve let out a long breath then exited the car abruptly, circling around to the passenger side and pulling open the door. He crouched down in the roadside gravel and took Jonathan's hands into his own. Jonathan turned to him, his eyes still glistening, tired and defeated, but relieved.

"You don't have to fight, Jon. And you shouldn't have to. Ever. Not even with me...I should have told you that I didn't get into school," Steve blurted, timing be damned. "It's just been hard not being able to see you whenever I wanted to...needed to. Maybe that makes me a brat, but there you go. So what." He half-smiled and looked away, feeling shy, exposed.

"I don't think you're a brat," Jonathan murmured, pulling his hands away gently and wiping his eyes on the back of his arm before continuing. "And I don't think you're not good enough for me...or whatever that shit was that you said at the mall. You're a way better person than you think you are."

"Jesus, Jon, so are you," Steve said quietly, the last word a sob in his throat. He stood awkwardly and climbed into Jonathan's lap, blindly seeking out the seat's release lever and easing it back.

They cried for awhile in each others' arms, tears devolving into hungry kisses until flashing lights slowed to a stop next to their parked car.

Steve jumped nimbly from the car, and bent over into the ditch, dry heaving for effect. It was a familiar stunt, but it always worked.

Jonathan climbed out of the car and waved to the tow truck driver, who expressed his concern.

"Carsick," Jonathan explained, sheepish. "I guess I'm driving now, right?" The truck moved on and the boys shared a relieved look.

"Well, it's a miracle, but I've completely recovered, Byers! Where to next?" Steve joked.

"I think I might know a place" Jonathan said, a glint of uncharacteristic mischief in his eye.

**Author's Note:**

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